

COLLECTED CIRCLE OF FIRE

I



by Anne Elizabeth Zeek

Collected Circle of Fire I

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CONTENTS:

"Aries Rising".....	page 3
"Chinese Fire Drill".....	page 5
"Catherine Wheel".....	page 81
"Aries Descending" (formerly "Slow Boat to Bespin").....	page 161

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

You may have noticed by now that this collection has a "volume I" in back of the title. Originally, Pat and I had intended to put the entire "Circle of Fire" cycle into a single volume. But after I got started, we saw how much was already written--more than enough to fill a zine. So, we decided to print the already completed stories as the first volume of a continuing story line.

The four reprinted stories in this volume are intended to form a complete story "circle" of their own, spanning the period from the end of "A New Hope" to "The Empire Strikes Back." The second volume will continue the saga with original stories, the only exception being two short reprints which will be completely rewritten. When finished, these two volumes will comprise an entire alternate SWARS universe.

A note on "Aries Descending" (formerly "Slow Boat to Bespin"): Because of the sexual content, Pat and I hesitated to reprint this story. However, since the events described in the story are integral to the development of the second volume story line, we do not consider this story exploitive--so, we decided to go ahead and print it. We do want to warn readers that this is a strong PG-13 equivalent story. Please use your own judgment as to whether to read it.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of you who've expressed an interest in "Circle." Over the last year, burnout from publishing Time Warp (at 400 pages!) and a giant writer's block have kept me from the typewriter--it's only your interest that's given me the incentive to overcome the block and begin writing "Circle" again.

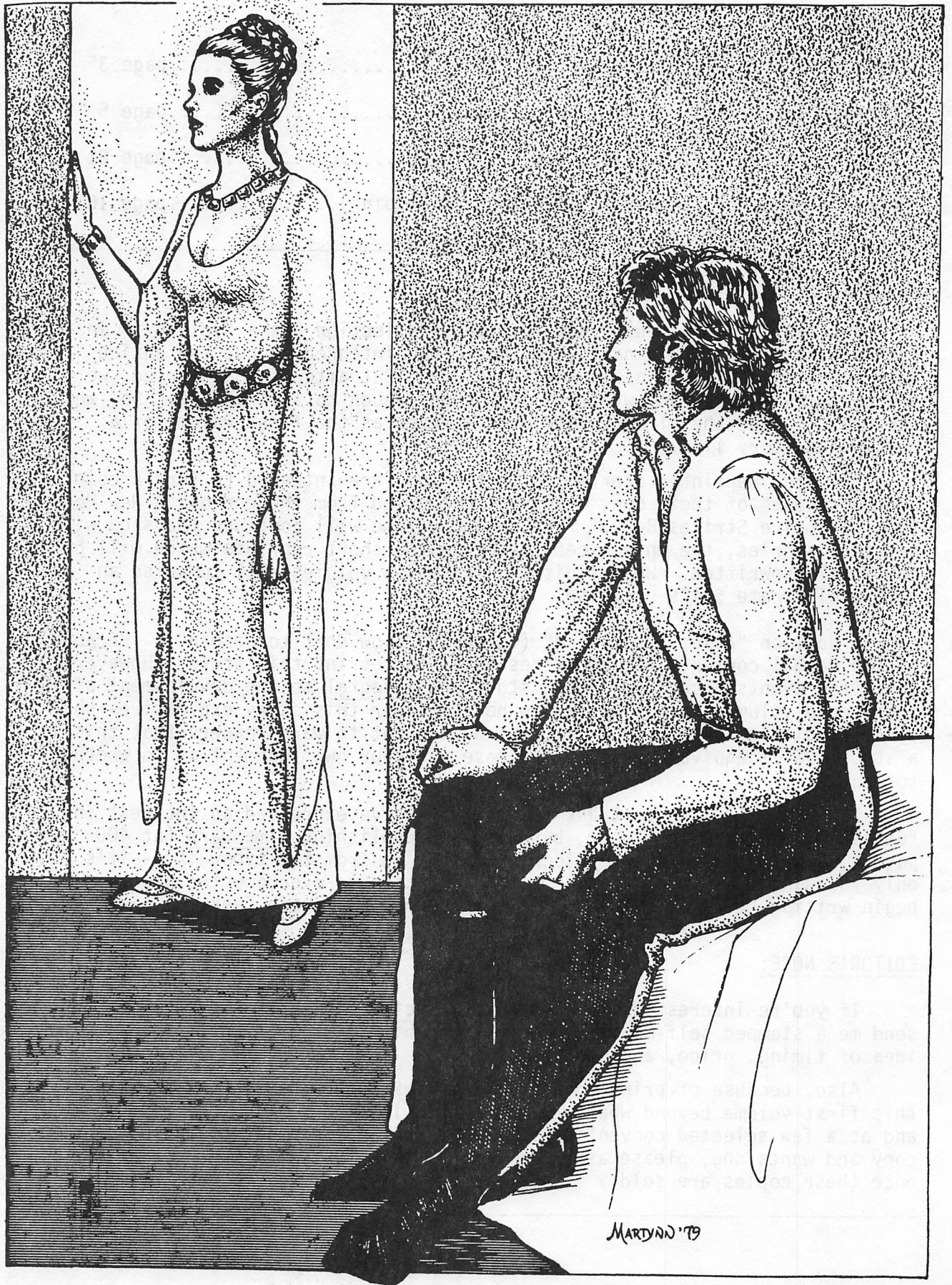
---Anne Elizabeth Zeek

EDITOR'S NOTE:

If you're interested in receiving Collected Circle of Fire II, please send me a stamped self-addressed envelope, which I'll hold until I have some idea of timing, price, and etc.

Also, because of printing economies, I expect to have a few copies of this first volume beyond what was reserved. I'll be selling these by mail and at a few selected conventions. If you know of someone who did not get a copy and wants one, please ask them to SASE me. There will be no reprints once these copies are sold.

--Pat Nussman



ARIES RISING

Y64M5D21ST

His boots fit snugly. Even without the extra alcohol he'd consumed at the victory celebration, Han had trouble drawing them off. Now, with the pleasant glow engulfing him, he experienced more problems than usual in divesting himself of his footwear. He sat on the edge of the bed, his mind completely occupied by the matter at hand. *Damn droids. Always under foot unless you need 'em.*

The sound of the door opening and a sudden draft attracted his fogged attention. *'Bout time one of those droids got here.*

He looked up. Shock held him silent.

Leia Organa, still in the white gown and silver-chased jewelry she had worn for the awards ceremony, stood framed in the doorway. Light from the corridor spilled in around her, gilding her crown of braids and softening her strong features. Han had never seen her look so young, so vulnerable, so tender.

He stared, bemused. The Aldevrian wine he'd drunk had softened his temper. No brittle comment broke the sudden, unwontedly sombre bond between him and the princess. They exchanged long, silent, measuring looks. Slowly, Leia entered the room. The door closed behind her.

Without speaking, his eyes held captive by Leia's, Han yanked off his boots and dropped them to the floor. He stood and walked over to her on stockinged feet.

Cupping her face with gentle hands, he bent to kiss her. Her lips tasted of salt. Tears. Tears from Leia. Leia, who had lost everything, yet had been able to comfort Luke in his loss. Leia,

who had stood proudly, smilingly, at the ceremony, ready to go on as long as the Alliance needed her.

Leia, who now needed to find her own source of strength.

Had he been sober, Han would have broken the fragile tension between himself and the princess with a wisecrack, a smirk, a lewd grin. But the wine freed the natural empathy and insight he usually hid so carefully. Silent still, he drew Leia into his arms.

She closed her eyes in surrender and invitation. Han kissed her lids, tasting the salt of her tears even more strongly than before. He kissed her mouth again. It was pliable, clinging, responsive. He rained a trail of kisses down her white throat to the pulse point at the base of her neck. She arched in silent pleasure, inviting further caress.

Han straightened. Taking Leia by the shoulders, he held her away from him. She gave a moan of displeasure and leaned against his restraining hands.

He had no illusions. He knew why she had come to him rather than to Luke. And he realized that he cared for her enough to accede willingly to her wishes tonight. Cared enough, even though, by its very nature, this gift might prove his undoing.

Leia needed him, and needed him now. She needed someone to hold her, to comfort her, to envelope her--to keep the ghosts at bay. Someone to prove that life did, despite everything, still go on.

But if he loved Leia tonight, it would be for the first and last time.

They would be united afterwards by a

deep, unbreakable tie, a tie more meaningful than any Leia would share with anyone else. And the very nature of that act of love would mean they would never repeat it.

Tomorrow, Leia would be hesitant, unsure, quick to take offense, afraid that Han would be cynically amused, or that he would presume, try to take advantage of what she would afterwards regard as her weakness. If he were not very careful, he would lose even her friendship. And yet, he would give her the solace she so desperately needed.

Han looked longingly at Leia's face. Tears she had been unable to cry aboard the Death Star, during the battle, at the ceremony, now threatened to overflow and trembled on her lashes. Until now, commitment had been only a word to Han, a word he'd studiously avoided. And when he finally met a woman whose courage, wit, and lust for life matched his, a woman for whom he could feel commitment, it was like this. . .

His grip tightened on her shoulders. He spoke at last.

"Leia, there'll be no turning back."
And we'll never repeat this stolen sweetness. Can I bear to have only your friendship from this night on?

She did not open her eyes. She raised her hands to her shoulders, closed her fingers over his wrist for a moment. She slid her hands along his arms in tender caress, grasped his shoulders, tried to pull him closer.

Han had not cried since he was twelve. He had almost forgotten how. Now, as he pulled Leia into a close embrace, tears filled his eyes. He held her tenderly, protectively, her head nestled to his chest. One arm was firm around her. With his other hand he gently raised her mouth to his. Their lips met in a kiss that slowly, deliberately, grew deep and passionate, a defiance of death in death's very shadow.

Han gave a shuddering sigh. Bidding a silent farewell to the Leia he might have loved, he gave comfort and a reaffirmation of life to the Leia in his arms.

CHINESE FIRE DRILL

PART ONE: Massassi
Y64M4D22Hr1000-1300ST

Han had rejected Regin Willard's invitation to be part of this "morning-after-the-battle" briefing session, so he preferred to stay out of sight. He hung to the shadows at the rear of the ancient chamber; only yesterday, eager young rebels had filled the large hall. Many of those warriors were missing today, and an air of proud mourning filled the room. The rebels had won their great victory, and had paid dearly for it. Han, looking at the empty chairs, wondered how long it would take the Alliance to recover from this triumph.

Ain't my problem, though. I done more'n my bit when I blasted those TIEs. Now I got my reward, and debts that need paying!

Han deliberately shrugged aside the nagging thought that kept intruding, the thought that people needed him, depended on him. He turned a deaf mental ear to the unfamiliar prodding of his conscience. He'd only come here this morning to say goodbye--and to see if he could talk Luke into giving up this unequal fight. If he couldn't. . . well, if Luke and Leia were fools enough to think that--

"Damn!" Han said viciously, slamming his hand against the rough stone wall so hard that he abraded the skin. He'd promised himself he could not think of Leia. Not now, not ever. *That was a one-nighter, Solo, 'n that's all it ever could be. Forget it.*

"Rialor?" Chewie said.

"Nah, Chewie. Nothing's wrong." Han ruffled the wookiee's long brown fur and looked around the hall again. By now, most of the surviving pilots, along with their

ground crews, support personnel, and a scattering of Artoo units and other droids, had assembled in front of the stage at the far end of the hall.

"D'ya see Luke anyplace, Chewie?"

"Nawiar."

"Well, him and Her Worship better get here soon, or we won't be around to say goodbye."

"Drealior schmearachle?" Chewie questioned plaintively, voice a muted rumble.

Han stared at his copilot in disbelief. Then, shoving himself away from the wall against which he'd been lounging, he planted himself directly in front of the wookiee.

"Wha'd'ya mean, 'Ain't we stayin' on?'! You crazy or something, Chewie? Just for starters, you don't think this buncha fuzzy-headed dreamers got a prayer, do you?"

"Dranior?"

"You bet they don't!"

"Sealichiorghur Leiarchiolaircht?"

For a moment, shock immobilized Han. Then he grabbed thick handfuls of the wookiee's chest fur and pulled Chewie's face down close to his.

"Just be very damn grateful no one overheard that, Chewie. I don't know what you know, or how you know, but forget it. Don't ever mention it again. It didn't happen, chum, okay?"

Han released Chewie. He checked that they were still out of earshot of everyone else, then turned back to the crest-

fallen wookiee and smoothed his rumpled fur.

"Look, I'm sorry. But ya always did have that dumb, starry-eyed idealistic streak showin' a parsec wide, Chewie. This ain't no crummy trideo show. This is real life. 'N princesses and cheap smugglers--" Han broke off abruptly. The bitterness in his voice betrayed and surprised him.

Chewie folded his arms. "Rowlrchan!"

Han glared. "I ain't the crazy one. In the first place, that's the last place anybody with any brains'd look for us. And second, Jabba's back on Dardanel by now, but that's hotter'n I wanna risk. Greedo sure didn't come after me on his own. Somebody'll still be in Mos Eisley, doin' Jabba's dirty work. If I can get that 35,000 to whoever's there, it'll--"

"Whaouiergle?" Chewie said incredulously.

"Thirty-five thousand credits, Chewie. Figure it yourself. There's thirty for that fletchin' spice load we hadda drop, three for the repairs Jabba made on the *Falcon* last year, and two for the salary advance he gave us to get out of that trouble on Rhiandola." Han jabbed Chewie in the ribs. "That's thirty-five thousand credits, ya lummox. And it gets Jabba off our backs, for good. Then it's business as usual. We got a living to earn, remember?"

Chewie looked at Han, blinked his blue eyes twice, and opened his large mouth.

Han didn't give him a chance to protest. "Get your brains back, Chewie. Air ain't free, ya know. Neither's fuel, water, food--"

A commotion at the front of the hall drew his attention. General Jan Dodonna, Commander Regin Willard, Princess Leia Organa, and a rather self-conscious looking Luke Skywalker stepped onto the bare stage from the wings. The assembled rebels broke into wild applause. Dodonna waved

once, then let his arm fall heavily to his side. Leia nodded, royally gracious even in an ill-fitting drab-green flight suit with her dark brown hair in braids looped at the sides. The four walked to the front of the stage and stood facing the audience.

Han raised a quizzical brow. Luke was moving in exalted circles! Not bad for a dirt-down farmboy. And damn, but it was a good thing he'd declined Willard's invitation, else he'd have been stuck on stage there, too!

Dodonna stepped forward. Even at this distance, signs of fatigue were plain. The general's reddened eyes, unkempt beard, and creased uniform screamed of a night spent sleepless--and not in celebration. Dodonna looked over the room, his eyes lingering on the empty chairs. Then he squared his shoulders. "Members of the Alliance, we. . . "

Han stopped listening. He'd heard more than enough stock speeches in his time. This one was memorable only for its admirable brevity.

When Dodonna said, ". . .and our heartfelt prayers and gratitude. Thank you," and stepped back, Commander Willard moved forward, his craggy, smooth-shaven face set in solemn lines. Willard's speech was more interesting; however, as he too opened with "Members of the Alliance," it was several minutes before Han listened properly.

"--and never before has anyone sacrificed so much for a cause. We cannot expect anyone to repeat such a sacrifice--nor would we wish it. Her loyalty to the Alliance has cost Leia Organa family, home, planet, people--the very things everyone has a right to take for granted.

"Alderaan was a world of peace and beauty. But now, there is only the broken aftermath of destruction."

As Willard spoke, Han glanced at Leia. Her chin was up, her face set in a calm



mask. No one looking at the princess on stage would dream that she had spent half the night crying in his arms, hopelessly repeating, "It's my fault, *mine*. Alderaan --it was all my fault!"

And Han had been unable to offer her comforting denials, because it was true. But Commander Willard didn't have to keep rubbing it in in public.

Willard faced the princess. "Your Highness, no one in this room does not know and honor your supreme sacrifice. We cannot restore what you lost for our sakes. But we can give honor to your strength, courage, and loyalty. The Alliance recognizes you as the Princess Organa, with the right to bestow your title as Princess of the Alliance on your children. You have full authority to act in all matters in the name of the Alliance."

The audience rose spontaneously, and more applause echoed eerily in the half-empty hall.

Leia acknowledged her new status in the councils of the Alliance with a small nod. Han knew with what coin of pain and guilt she had purchased this morning's outward serenity. *'N not one of these bastards realizes it, damn them.* If just one more fatuous speechifier made just one more remark about the poor girl's planet being blown to smithereens, Han was tempted to make a few pointed remarks of his own, with his fists for emphasis.

Fortunately for the peace of the assembly, Willard's speech flowed smoothly into a standard oration of encouragement and praise.

Han ignored the high-flying rhetoric and leaned back against the cool stone wall. An amused, cynical smirk twisted his mouth. *Here we go. The postbattle politickin's started. Maybe me and Chewie better get out now.*

Willard's speech closed and Leia approached the edge of the stage. Willard bowed to her and stepped back to stand be-

side Dodonna and Luke.

Leia looked out across the audience, her brown eyes meeting and holding the glance of each person there for the space of a heart-beat. Then she smiled and sat down on the edge of the stage, feet dangling.

Her first remarks were a charming response to the honor paid her by the Alliance. Having a keen idea of her real feelings on this, Han dismissed her comments as mere politicking--or diplomacy. Just as his attention began to wander to the problems awaiting him once he blasted off the base, Leia's voice changed its tone. Firmly, seriously, she began a discussion of tactics and strategy for the next few weeks.

Han noted that everyone, from fledgling pilot to grizzled veteran, paid close attention. Folding his arms across his chest in his best 'so-show-me' attitude, Han listened too.

After several minutes, he raised an eyebrow in surprise. He looked to Chewie. "Her Mightiness makes sense. 'Steady foolin' around with fake royal titles, they should make her a general. They'd have half a chance then."

He directed his attention back to Leia's remarks. "Shit. I knew we shoulda headed outta here earlier."

"Wawiar?"

"'What's the matter?!' Chewie, can't you hear? The girl's talkin' evacuation. And if she ain't lookin' straight at us, I'm blind as a cave-groper." He straightened. "C'mon. Let's get outta here 'fore Her Glory thinks of a new job for us. Let'm use their own spaceships. They must have plenty."

Han led the way to the massive, intricately carved wooden doors at the rear of the hall. Chewie put a furry shoulder to one. It opened easily, quietly, and the Corellian and the

wookiee slipped through.

They were outside the huge, quarry-stone temple on a wide terrace. Yavin loomed on the horizon, a red-orange globe filling a quarter of Massassi's turquoise sky. Heavy perfume hung on the air from the vegetation which grew to the very base of the temple. The whistles, growls, grunts, and screams of a jungle morning assaulted Han's ears.

He shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun. By dint of his profession, Han, when planet-side, was a night person. He'd not been awake for a dirtside morning in more years than he cared to recall. Were suns really that bright when seen through an atmosphere?

"C'mon, Chewie." They walked down broad, shallow steps to the landing bay. It was deserted. Not even the ubiquitous droids were there today. It was echoing, dim after the brilliance of the morning sun, and close, warm. The bitter smell of fuel and lubricants competed with the musty aroma of the jungle outside.

The *Falcon* still sat where she'd been parked yesterday when he'd landed after the battle. Han ran a practised eye along her ungainly form, her utilitarian surface. It would be good to board her and take her home to space, away from baby-faced dreamers and tart-tongued princesses--either of whom could too easily get a grip on him he couldn't break.

Han put a caressing hand on one of the *Falcon*'s support struts. *Oh, no, not me they won't. It's you and me, baby. 'N Chewie. Things'll be back to normal soon enough. You'll see.*

"Han?"

He stiffened. Leia. She had cut out of the meeting to follow them from the temple, damn her. Han closed his eyes tightly and clenched his fists against the unexpected pain her wary, guarded voice gave him. He wanted her. Wanted her more than any other woman he'd ever

had. But he couldn't have her. He couldn't stay, even for her--and she would never go. Of all the lousy tricks for fate to play--

Well, he hadn't stayed alive for thirty years in a less than forgiving universe without learning to act, to lie. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. Leia deserved complete commitment, commitment he could not give. For her, it had to be all or nothing.

All right, Princess, it's nothing. And you don't have to worry about me hanging around, or wonder what I'll say about last night. . . Han opened his eyes, managed his usual cocky grin, and spun around to face Leia.

"Well, wha'd'ya know, it's Her Worship come to see us off!" He looked around for Chewie. The damned romantic fool had ducked out of sight. "Chewie! Come and say goodbye to the princess!"

There was no response. Mentally cursing, Han turned back to Leia. Her expression was guarded, closed. Han knew he had to tread with care. "Speechifyin' over? Or is it the kid's turn?"

Leia smiled slightly, her watchful dark eyes on his face. "Luke's very modest. He refuses to accept any credit for the victory. He says the Force and General Kenobi guided him."

Han grimaced. "The Force! The kid's a damn good shot and that's all there is to it. That don't take no mystical clap-trap to explain."

Leia's expression was suddenly puzzled. She shook her head slowly, braids brushing the collar of her flight suit. "I'm not very mystical, either, Han. But Luke did turn off his tracking computer--" She paused, gave a slight shiver. "That nearly gave everyone in Command Central heart failure. I thought--well, never mind that. The point is, Luke took that shot at the exhaust vent blind."

"Now look, lady," Han began.

"Could you do that shot, at that speed, without 'puter help?"

Han paused. Finally, reluctantly, he said, "No."

"Are you a good shot?"

"The best, Princess!" Han's indignation was not assumed.

Leia shrugged. "Well then?"

Han was nonplussed for a minute. "Well . . . I don't know, Leia. I just can't buy it. Nothing rules my life but me. It's always my choice."

Leia moved forward to face Han across the pitted surface of the *Falcon's* loading ramp. "And what's your choice now, fly-boy? You run out immediately? Without saying goodbye?"

Her deep-brown eyes met and held Han's hazel ones for a quiet moment. His eyes shifted first. "Yeah, well . . . you know how it is, Princess. Me'n Chewie, we got our own lives to live." He stared unseeing at the ramp.

"I--we though you might have changed your mind about leaving." Her voice was low, strained. "You came back, after all. Luke would have failed, if not for you. You're one of us now, Han. You're part of the Alliance. I--we'd all be dead if you hadn't come back."

A tic leaped in Han's cheek. He lifted his eyes to Leia's face. "Yeah, Princess, I come back. I come back because Luke needed me. And I don't know why, but damn it, I like the kid. There's somethin' there. . . ." He shook his head, wondering at himself, then continued, staring straight at Leia. "But I come back for him, Your Worship. Not this high-sounding rebellion of yours." His gesture took in the landing bay, the temple, the entire rebel base.

Leia started to speak, but Han ignored

her and went on. "I told you before, Princess. I ain't in this for your revolution. D'you think I care who's running this galaxy? All I know is it sure ain't me. Look. I like Luke. I was able to help him. That's all it was, Your Glory."

Leia's eyes seemed to bore into him. Then her face softened and she smiled. "I see," she said. "Thank you, Han."

He swept an overly humble bow. "Don't mention it, Your Worship. You stick with this bunch of dreamers and you made need someone who's got his eyes on--"

"The main chance?" she interrupted. Then her lips tightened. "I'm sorry. I apologize."

"All you got now's heroic dreamers," Han said, spurred to anger by emotions he didn't understand. "I stopped dreaming when I was scarcely older'n Luke. And I ain't no hero, Princess. So don't try to make me one."

With a flash of anger that matched his own, Leia snapped, "And I'm not a princess, hotshot. Alderaan's gone. I'm nothing but landless, crownless royalty. I don't even own the clothes I'm standing in. My title means nothing, in spite of that damn ceremony this morning. You know that as well as I do, Han Solo. From now on I'm only what I make of myself. Han, I--"

"Look, sister, you and your damn rebellion don't need me. And I don't need another job. Smugglin's enough without adding rebellion to it."

"A smuggler's skills would probably be of more use to us than--"

"And I been in even dirtier games," Han's voice overrode hers again. He was unsure if he was trying to prove something to Leia--or to himself. "Piracy. Drug dealing. Slave-running. Worse. If you want a haloed knight, take Luke. But leave me alone, woman."

"I see," Leia said in a dead voice. She twisted around as if to walk away, then slumped against one of the *Falcon's* landing struts.

Han swore under his breath and started toward her, banging sharply into the loading ramp. He ignored the pain and leaned forward, hands splayed on the ramp's rough surface. "Leia."

She straightened and turned back to him. Her eyes were wide and suspiciously bright.

"Leia, I would if I could. But I can't. I just can't."

Leia looked at his set face, his tensed hands. Slowly she nodded. "I know, Han. And thank you."

They stood staring at each other, neither making a move to go. The silence was unpleasantly electric. Leia drew a shuddering breath that was not quite a sob.

In utter frustration, Han knotted his hand to a first and slammed it against the ramp. The ramp shook slightly under the blow, and Han cursed violently as pain shot through his hand. The abrasion he'd received earlier began bleeding again.

Leia took a step forward. "Han--"

"Han! Leia! Chewie! Hey, where is everybody?" The shifting, fragile tension was shattered by Luke Skywalker's enthusiastic entrance. "Oh, there you are. What're--"

Han and Leia turned to face Luke, who was smiling broadly at them, his blond hair and bright yellow jacket gleaming in the dimness. Leia shot a quick, unsure look at Han, then held out her hand, beckoning Luke to her side.

"Hello, Luke. Han and I were discussing his future plans."

Luke crossed to Leia. His ingenuous

glance flashed from princess to smuggler and back again. "Did you tell him our idea yet?"

Han eyed Leia accusingly. He still felt jarred by Luke's boisterous intrusion into a moment that should have belonged only to himself and his princess. "No, kid, she didn't." Then, ignoring Luke, Han let his gaze travel scornfully over Leia's figure. "Softening me up, Your Worship? You're learning."

Leia's eyes widened and as quickly narrowed. Her cheeks reddened, but she returned Han's insolent gaze with a haughty glare. "I've had an excellent teacher," she said coldly, staring straight into Han's eyes.

Han's whitened lips thinned even more and two high spots of color appeared on his cheeks. "Looks to me like you've outdistanced your teacher, lady."

Leia's chin lifted, her face freezing to icy arrogance. "I always learn my lessons well, Solo."

"Oh, I'll just bet you do, sister," said Han softly. He ran another slow and appraising look from Leia's face to her feet and back to stare into her furious eyes. Han smiled nastily. "I'll just bet you--"

Leia gasped and her right hand lifted. Then she dropped it back to her side, clasping firmly onto the loose fabric of her flight-suit. Her face had gone very white. "You--"

"Han? Leia?" Luke's puzzled, slightly worried voice yanked Han out of his intense, vicious concentration. He had forgotten the younger man was there, and now glared angrily at Leia.

"Wh'd'ya want, kid?" Han snapped.

"Don't yell at Luke," Leia said coldly.

"Don't tell me what to--"

"Hey," said Luke. "What's wrong?"

"Nothin', kid."

"This boor thinks--"

Han's and Leia's statements collided and they both fell silent. Han's eyes still smoldered angrily and the tic in his cheek twitched rapidly. Leia was still pale and breathing hard. She no longer looked in the least likely to cry. Han thought she was far more likely to try to deck him.

As Han looked at Leia some of his wrath faded. But when he spoke, his voice was still hard. "Okay, Your Glory. So you weren't setting me up. Do me a favor, though, will ya? Next time you got bright plans for my time, come to me. I don't like finding out second-hand."

Luke, with another worried glance at Leia, walked around the landing ramp to stand by Han. "It's not like that at all, Han. Leia and I talked this over together."

"Oh ya did, did ya?" Han slid a side-long look at Leia. "When?"

"Early this morning, before the tactical meeting," Luke said innocently. "We figured we have to move the base, Han, because by now Starfleet must know we're here. They'll be sending a strike-force as soon as they can muster out a battalion from the nearby ports."

"This is news?" said Han. "So pack your little rebels onto your transports, Princess, and get out of the system Big deal."

"Han, the only ships we have available now are the single person X- and Y-wings. And few enough of those after the battle." Leia's voice held an uncharacteristic note of desperation.

"So call in your transports," Han said. He shrugged and leaned casually against the support strut of the *Falcon*.

"We can call in some of them," Leia

said. Her eyes were shadowed. "But--"

"But?" Han prodded.

"But we'll need those for the--" Luke began eagerly.

Han held up a hand. "Wait a sec, kid," he said. "Go on, Princess. Where are your transports?"

"They were in a safe port, under various registries." Leia stopped and bit her lip. "Alderaan. They were on Alderaan. Eighty percent of our--" She shook her head. "Most of those that are left are too widely dispersed to reach us in time."

Han looked from Leia to the hopeful face of Luke. "Too bad, Princess. Never put all your eggs in one basket like that. Too chancy. But wh'a'ya want me to do? The *Falcon* ain't no ferry service, ya know. 'Sides, you couldn't get everyone off in her--it'd take weeks. And time you ain't got."

"We're not quite that stupid, fly-boy," Leia snapped. "We know the *Falcon* can't evacuate the base. What we thought you could do is . . . " She paused and eyed Han nervously.

Han grinned. "I can't wait to hear this, Princess. Out with it."

"We though you could steal some ships --we'd help you, of course--" She spoke quickly, sounding slightly breathless. "We've got pilots and crews. All we need are a few heavy freighters and armed transports."

There was a long moment of stunned silence in the landing bay. Luke and Leia both gazed at Han with widely hopeful eyes. Han stared back at them.

The silence was broken by Han's booming, disbelieving laughter.

Leia stiffened and her face iced over once more. "It's useless to talk to him, Luke. If it doesn't involve money, he's



not interested." She spun on her heel, stalked away from the *Falcon*.

Han stopped laughing, more at the sight of the hurt on Luke's face than because of Leia's barbed comment. "Come off the high kick, Your Worship," he called after her. "Try to think logically --and illegally--for once in your high-class life."

Leia stopped, turned to face him. "Well?" she said. She side-stepped the loading ramp and approached Han and Luke with her chin at an arrogant angle.

Han relaxed against the strut, ostentatiously folding his arms. "Where are spaceships usually kept?"

Luke and Leia exchanged a speaking glance. "In spaceports?" Luke finally ventured.

"Very good, kid! And who controls every major spaceport in this sector?"

There was another silence. Leia nodded numbly as the import sank in. Luke looked stunned.

"Right, kids." Han shook his head in disbelief. "Man, would I like to be watching when your bunch of honest morons tries it. With no codetapes, no passwords, no knowledge of the routines--hell, you'd have better luck marching up to the Imperial port commandant and requisitioning six ships in the name of Princess Organa and the Alliance."

Han laughed once more. "Shit, fill out enough forms in triplicate and quadruplicate and you might even get away with that." He sobered, shook his head again. "But to just go out and 'steal a couple ships'? No way, kids. Ya'd never get off-world alive."

Luke's shoulders slumped dispiritedly and he shook his head. Self-disgust sharpened his voice. "Spaceports. Imperial spaceports. Docking procedures and port protocol. Han, we never even thought of all that."

"No reason ya should've, kid." Han grinned sardonically and ruffled Luke's hair. The unwonted intensity governing the see-saw emotions of the past half-hour frightened him. It was good to once again be just a cynical smuggler. "After all, how many planet hoppers've you piloted, anyway?"

Han flicked a glance at Leia and his grin widened. From the sparks in her eyes she was a lit fire-cracker ready to explode. And, for once, not at him. She met his glance, bit her lips. Then she shook her head, braids swinging. Disgustedly she said, "Oh, shit!"

Han's grin turned to laughter fueled further by Luke's quickly muffled "Leia!"

Leia ignored both reactions. "We need those ships and we need them now," she said. "You're right, Han. We have more problems facing us than we could even begin to realize. We need your help. Surely you can see that?"

Before the Corellian could respond, Luke said, "Han, at Mos Eisley, you just blasted off-planet. Can't we do the same? Why not storm the field, board the ships, and blast off? Why will we need--"

"Yeah, kid, I left Mos Eisley in a rush. But there are a couple of differences between that take-off and what you're planning. First off, the *Falcon*'s already mine. And up to the time I blasted off Tatooine with some 'cargo' the Empire wanted, my ID and registry were in good shape in that sector."

Han shrugged an eloquent shoulder, continued. "Second, if those storm-troopers hadn't followed you to the docking bay, we'd'a been all right. I'd already checked the *Falcon* out with Port Central 'n had been cleared for takeoff. That's what gave us our margin of safety when the Imperial patrol was alerted to your escape. We were already listed as an authorized departure. By the time the Imps got their figures straightened out,

we were just about outta range."

The space-pilot shook his head. "To do what you want, you need identi-disks to get onto the field, mastertapes to feed into the navicomputers, codebooks and protocol printouts to con the tower staff, and that's just off the top of my head. There's dozens of other things you'd need for a liftoff from an Imperial port."

Han glanced from Luke to Leia. The young Jedi and the princess were looking at him with identical expressions of wide-eyed, earnest interest. Han squeezed his eyes tightly shut. "Oh, shit!" Somebody had to teach these innocents the facts of life--and somehow, he'd been elected. *Ya shoulda gone when you had the chance, Solo. Morga alone knows when you'll make it away now.*

He opened his eyes. "Okay, kids. Time for a real briefing session." He stepped to one side, bowed Luke and Leia aboard the *Falcon* with a flourish. He looked for Chewie. *Romantic idiot! If that furball thinks he's helping.* . . . Han took a deep breath, shouted his partner's name. "Chewie, get your mangy carcass over here and into the *Falcon*. We got war plans to discuss!"

A muffled growl answered him from the deeper reaches of the landing bay, and the wookiee's huge form loomed into sight. Han waited with foot-tapping impatience.

Chewie came abreast of him and met his angry glare with a guileless blue gaze. Han started to deliver a blistering comment on the wookiee's idea of "help" in his romantic affairs; he thought again and simply shook his head in resignation. What was the use, anyway? He waved Chewie aboard with a half-defeated gesture and followed him up the ramp.

Luke and Leia were already seated in the lounge area of the *Falcon*'s strictly functional common room. Han dropped into the chair next to Luke to face Leia across the unactivated game

table. Chewie squeezed himself behind the table to fit into the further corner.

Han rubbed a finger along the scar on his chin. He looked at the others measuringly. Leia met his gaze steadily. She raised an enquiring brow. "Well, Solo?"

Han pursed his lips thoughtfully, paused a moment before answering. He shifted in his chair. With exaggerated care he slowly traced the narrow scrollwork design bordering the etched game-board on the table. Finally he looked up to meet Leia's gaze, his own eyes narrowed in concentration.

"It'll cost ya, Your Worship."

An indecipherable emotion flickered across Leia's face before she smiled sardonically. "So what else is new, Solo?"

Han ignored Leia's comment. "Your best bet's Dardanel."

Leia looked at him curiously. "Dardanel? But--"

Han nodded. "Yeah, I know. Quadrant capital, legendary home of mankind, one of three revolving sites where the Senate is convened." He gave a lopsided half-smile. "Nobody said it'd be easy, Princess. Just expensive."

Luke looked perplexed. "If Dardanel's so important, aren't we taking unnecessary risks going there? Wouldn't we be safer on a planet like Tatooine?"

"Not really, kid," Han said. "On a dustdown planet like Tatooine, even if you had any choice of spacecraft to 'borrow', the whole operation'd stand out like a sore thumb."

Leia nodded. "Whereas on Dardanel. . . ."

Han grinned. "Told ya you were a good student, Your Glory." He pretended to ignore the wash of scarlet on Leia's cheeks that told him his comment had hit

home. "On Dardanel you got Cinninnatus. Between the ground port and the orbiting drydock it's the biggest, busiest, most varied spaceport in the quadrant. And in the city proper, you can find contacts to buy, sell, beg, borrow, or steal anything. Spaceships included."

Luke and Leia smiled hopefully, happily at each other. Chewie blinked thoughtfully, asked, "Nahhahalll?"

Han nodded, quite pleased with himself. He lounged back in his chair, slung his leg over the arm, and clasped his hands behind his neck. "Right, Chewie. Makaval. Jasne Makaval."

"Makaval?" Leia repeated with interest, head tilted inquiringly.

Han straightened. "Like I said, Your Worship, it'll cost ya. Last I heard, Jasne was still a 'citizen-in-good-standing' on Dardanel. She can steal everything you need--codebooks, voiceprints, protocol printouts, master-tapes, identidisks, the whole package. The only thing is, she's expensive. She's damn expensive. And since you need this the day before yesterday, you'll have to offer penalty pay."

Leia gave an unladylike snort. "If she comes on your recommendation, I know she's expensive." She leaned forward, the dark brown braids brushing her cheeks. "And how do we know she'll help us?"

Han shrugged. "You don't know. You give her the facts, make her an offer, see if she's willing to take the job."

"Willing?" Luke repeated numbly.

"Willing," Han said. "Look, kid, Jasne Makaval ain't a street-punk, or even a syndicate heist-pro. She can afford to pick and choose jobs. And if she ain't interested, no amount of money can buy her. She's completely independent and tops in her field." He shook his head in wonder. "Some of the

things she's stolen--you wouldn't believe it!" He grinned, winked knowingly at Chewie, who gave an answering chortle, and continued, "For that matter, the owners--er, the former owners--wouldn't believe it!"

Leia frowned thoughtfully. "How do you know she's a good thief? Maybe she's just an excellent forger or a copyist."

Han shook his head. "The lady is a thief, Princess. And the best in the business."

Leia cocked an inquisitive brow. "You've worked with her before?"

"Maybe." Han's face was closed, inviting no breaching of that wall marked 'private'. "But that ain't here or there. At this point, she's your best chance."

Leia leaned back again. She and Luke exchanged a long look.

Luke turned to Han. "Han, do you think we should--I mean, well, she is a crook and all." His voice was hesitant, his open expression concerned.

Han looked at the younger man in exasperated disbelief. "Are you serious, kid? What the hell d'ya think I am?" He avoided looking at Leia. "Luke, the Alliance needs those ships, but it's gonna take a lot of luck to succeed. One of the things you can do to help along that luke is hire the best in the trade to help. If Jasne takes the job she'll get you everything you need to pull this off."

"He's right, Luke." Leia leaned over, took one of Luke's hands in a light clasp. "We need the best. And since we're willing to turn thieves ourselves, I don't think we can quibble at hiring a professional." The princess's voice was calm, measured. She turned her thoughtful gaze on Han and he automatically braced himself. She was up to something! What, he didn't know, but the expression

on her face boded ill.

"We do need 'the best', Han. And not just the best thief. That's why I want you to see this through," Leia said as she straightened and turned from Luke.

"Oh, no, sister. No way. You ain't roping me into anything else. I already done more'n I was paid for. I told ya where'n how to steal your ships. You can carry it from here. Leave me out."

Leia's thoughtful expression was replaced by a malicious gleam of humor. "Sorry, Han. You're in already, like it or not. You're the only one of us who knows this Jasne Makaval."

Han set both hands flat on the table, half-rose from his seat. "No, Princess. Enough is enough."

Leia looked up at him, mouth twisted sardonically. "Right, Solo. And won't we look great going up to every female in Cinnacinnatus, asking, 'Jasne Makaval? Would you like to help us steal a couple of spaceships?' Use your head, fly-boy. You have to be our contact. We don't know where or how to reach Makaval. We need you."

Han dropped back into his seat, returned Leia's gaze sullenly. "Princess," he shook his head, eyes troubled, "there's good reasons I can't go back to Dardanel."

"Back?" Leia pounced on the operative word.

Han cut glances with Chewie, shrugged. "Yeah, back. I made enemies there, and got a certain ex-employer after my hide 'bout a missing cargo."

Leia smiled sarcastically. "You have your reward, fly-boy. Use it. As for the rest, if a smuggler can't avoid discovery, he's not a very good smuggler, is he?"

Han's lips tightened. "You're pushing too hard, sister." He shoved his chair away from the table, scraping it along the

metal deck, and it toppled when he stood. He strode angrily toward the cockpit.

"Afraid, Han?" Leia's taunting voice followed him.

He swung around, hands clenched at his sides.

Luke gripped Leia's arm and whispered loudly, "Leia, what're you doing?"

"CREALIOGRGH!!" Chewie half-pushed himself up from his seat and glared at the slight young princess. Undaunted, Leia stared down the wookiee and shook off Luke's hold.

The by-play lasted long enough for Han to regain control of his temper.

"All right, you two--you three. Stop right there. There's no time for this stupidity." Han faced Leia squarely, his right hand unconsciously hooked on his belt just above his blaster. "Okay, Princess. Just how much authority do you have in the Alliance? And what kind of cold cash does that translate into?"

Leia searched Han's face before answering. "You heard Willard, Han. 'Full authority to act in the name of the Alliance.' Don't worry." She lifted her head proudly. "We can meet Jasne's price--and yours."

Han's eyes narrowed at the mention of Regin Willard. "Right. I can really see Willard and Dodonna going along with this." Han turned away. "Sorry, Princess. It mighta worked. But you'll never get it by your chiefs-of-staff."

Leia's voice was calm. "I know General Dodonna and Commander Willard will see the need for our actions, Han. But you're right. We should discuss our plans with them. We owe them the courtesy."

Han turned back to Leia. "That ain't what I--" His eyes met and held Leia's, shifted to Luke, to Chewie, and back to the princess. Damn if he'd ever met

such a one for twisting everything to advantage! He shook his head. "It ain't gonna be that easy, Your Glory, even if I do agree to help. But we'll see." He jerked his head toward the exit. "C'mon. Let's find the brass."

*

Several hours later a vastly altered Corellian strode down the ramp of the *Falcon*. Han buttoned the sleeves of his honey-amber tunic and settled it more comfortably about his hips. He fingered the contents of the small leather pouch dangling from his belt and made sure he had all the identification he needed for this new persona.

Satisfied, Han turned his attention to the *Falcon*. He inspected his ship carefully, noting the alterations in pain, registry markings, and cosmetic surfaces. He checked that the changes matched the specifications he'd given the techs. The transformation failed to meet his strict standards--*guess I can't really expect a good job. After all, these rebels ain't had much practice to date, recycling ships--* but it would stand up to all but the most thorough scrutiny. And, since both his new ID and the *Falcon*'s new registry were clean and authentic--*they'd better be. Morga knows I paid enough for those papers--* there was no reason to expect anything other than a cursory, routine inspection at Cinninnatus Port.

Han ran a hand through hair that was no black and tightly curled around ears that jutted out slightly. He'd not used this identity in more than a year, and felt somewhat ill-at-ease. Pinching the bridge of his subtly widened nose between thumb and forefinger, he blinked once or twice to ease the stinging sensation of the dark brown eye-dye he'd used. Then he checked his chronometer. 1300 hours standard.

True to his prediction, it had not

been easy convincing Dodonna and Willard of the necessity for Leia's plan. Though they were too polite to admit it in front of him, the inference was clear--neither rebel leader wanted to depend on thieves and smugglers to salvage the camp. Han had finally slammed out of the War Room after delivering an ultimatum--either the rebels outfit a task force in three hours to go with him to Dardanel, or he'd wash his hands of the lot of them. The deadline he'd given them was up.

Han dismissed the last two technicians scrambling over the *Falcon*. He looked around the landing bay. Empty. He'd half expected this, but his jaw clenched tightly over a sudden and unanticipated sense of betrayal mixed inexplicably with the relief. He frowned. He'd wanted out of this trap, had been jealous of his freedom. So why this sense of loss? After all, Dardanel was damn hot for him, and for him to willingly go back there. . .

"Han?" The breathless voice caught him unawares. He spun around, reflecting ruefully that this was the second time in one day he'd allowed Leia's sudden materialization to disconcert him. *Just as well I'm cutting out*, he thought sardonically.

"Han?" Disbelief colored Leia's voice.

Han collected himself, replied steadily, JoDar Kylan, milady, at your service." He swept her a courtly bow.

"Han, it is you! What have you done to yourself?" Leia's fascinated and comprehensive gaze took in the smuggler's altered appearance. "I don't believe it, you look so different."

"I am sorry, milady. You are mistaken." Han's voice was deeper than normal, his accent and grammar more educated. "I am JoDar Kylan, Master of the *Central Suns III*." Han waved in the direction of the transformed *Falcon*.

Leia shook her head, a gleam of

mischievous in her dark brown eyes. "Sorry, flyboy. I know every person and every ship on this base, and no JoDar Kylan or *Central Suns III* are included among them. Besides, you may not look like Han, or even sound like him, but," she cocked her head consideringly, "that's sure Han's body under there."

Han grinned and deliberately let traces of the old Solo show through his new persona. "I wouldn't go within a parsec of that line," he said. "But look, Your Worship, if you think I'm sticking my nose or my ship back on Dardanel without taking certain 'precautions', think again."

His grin deepened to quiet laughter as he took in certain alterations in Leia's own appearance. "Hey, Your Glory. What's happened to the princess?"

Leia looked down at herself. The tan leather knee-high boots, brown wool culottes, and caramel-colored homespun belted overblouse fit well--almost too well, Han thought.

"I picked out the most practical outfit I could find," Leia said defensively. "What's wrong with it?"

"Not a thing," Han said. He walked around Leia, running his eyes up and down her figure appreciatively. Come to a stand-still, he hooked his thumbs under his narrow leather belt. He nodded. "Not a thing!" he repeated slowly and with emphasis. He raised his eyes to her head. His grin widened. "I think it's the hair cut," he said. "It sure changes you."

The long brown braids were gone. In their stead Leia sported flyaway wips of shaggily close-cropped hair. Leia's eyes narrowed. "And what's wrong with my hair?" she asked through clenched teeth. Her voice held a distinct chill.

Han quickly back-pedaled. He held his hands up laughingly. "Nothing, Leia, believe me." He eyed her measuringly from a safe distance.

"Nothing at all. Matter of fact, I rather like the change." He quirked a brow questioningly. "Has Luke seen the 'new you'?"

Leia shook her head, sending the short wispy curls dancing. "I haven't seen him since we left the 'summit' meeting. He's due here soon."

Han leaned back against the support strut. He nodded knowingly. "Luke won't like it."

"Han, it's only a haircut."

"Yeah, but add it to that outfit, and it's damn unprincessly. The kid thinks more of your royal image than you do, Leia."

Leia snorted. "My image! My image is a royal pain. I don't have time to worry about my image when the Alliance is in danger."

The laughter left Han's face. He straightened, took a step toward her. "Leia, you're not planning on coming to Dardanel with me?"

"Han, I can't just stay here, waiting. I can't stop fighting and let them turn me into a figurehead, a symbol of the Alliance." Leia's voice was strangely husky.

Han reached out a hand to her. "Damnall, Leia, I just didn't think." She was right. And he, of all people, knew why she had to keep busy, had to keep the ghosts of Alderaan away. His hand almost touched her face. "Leia, I--"

"Leia? Han?"

Han dropped his hand back to his side. "That kid's got the lousiest timing I ever seen. Either that, or there's something to that Force crap after all," he said in an undertone as he turned to face Luke.

Luke flicked his gaze over Han,

hesitated at Leia, took in the short hair and casual clothes, dismissed her as he spoke. "Excuse me, sir. I'm looking for Han Solo. Have you seen him? I was supposed to meet him here with the Princess Organa."

The Corellian shook his head. "I've not seen Han for, oh. . . 15 to 20 minutes now," Han, in his JoDar Kylan persona once more, answered in all honesty. "Perhaps my young cousin--" he drew Leia forward.

Leia, the very image of shy confusion, shook her head.

Luke's glance slid over her once more. "No, well, if you should happen to see either of them, I--" He stopped speaking, shook his head as though to clear it. His eyes returned to Leia. Shocked comprehension dawned. "No, it can't be. I--Leia?"

Han was hard put to keep from laughing. Luke's voice had come dangerously near to cracking on that startled, "Leia?"

Blue eyes wide, Luke circled his two friends. In spite of his disguise, Han's lop-sided grin remained the same. It appeared now as Luke stood in front of them. "Han, it is you! But you. . . what have you. . . what are you. . . and the princess, why. . . Han? Leia? Han!!"

Han's grin widened as Luke hugged him enthusiastically. "Hey, easy on the ribs, kid."

Luke apologized and stepped back. He shook his head wonderingly. "I didn't know either of you, until--Han, you look so. . . so. . ."

"I think different is the word you're looking for," Leia said.

Luke nodded. "Yes, you both look different." He looked at Leia more closely. "You. . . you don't look anything like the Princess Organa, Leia.

Is that a good idea?" A faint air of disapproval tinged his words.

Han refrained from throwing Leia an 'I-told-you-so' smirk. "That's the general idea, Luke. By now 'the Princess Organa' is under indictment on every Imperial planet from here to the Outlands and back to the Core. On the other hand, Sinah Andell," he gestured theatrically to Leia, who obediently spun around for him, "the young cousin of Merchant-Shipper JoDar Kylan," he bowed in introduction, "is a complete nonentity in the Imperial scheme of things."

"When did we decide that?" Leia whispered as she stepped to Han's side.

"Just now," Han whispered back. "But I'da thought of it sooner or later, anyway. Protective coloring, Leia." Deliberately, Han reverted to the voice, the mannerisms of the old Han Solo once more.

"Makes sense," Leia admitted grudgingly. "But what about IDs?"

Affronted, Han glared at her. As though he'd forget anything so basic! "I got IDs to spare aboard the *Falcon*. Relax."

Luke looked from Leia to Han. "They. . . they're great disguises, but you don't have to risk yourself, Leia. You know I'd--Han and I would--"

Han kicked surreptitiously, effectively quieting him. He had thought of an overwhelming reason to justify Leia's going with them to Dardanel, but did not want to mention it in front of her. She'd damn him as an over-protective idiot and stomp off in a huff.

"Yeah, kid. Well, there's one thing we keep forgetting, the little lady's the one with the credits. That makes her more important on this mission than anyone else. And speaking of anyone else. . . " Han checked his chronometer again. It was late. "Will anyone else

be joining us on this little excursion?"

Leia shook her head. "Our two closest transports will reach base in thirteen hours, and a third will arrive early tomorrow morning. All available pilots and crew will board them, rendezvous with us in Cinncinnatus in exactly 36 standard hours."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"How you gonna run any blockade the Imperials might have up?"

Leia counted off her answers on her fingers. "Number one, all three ships have clean registrations, so they'll have no trouble landing right in Cinncinnatus Port. Number two, in the event they do have any problems, by the time they reach Dardanel we'll have the codebooks and any other information we'll need to help them land safely. And number three, if all else fails, my pilots have experience running Imperial blockades."

"You take chances, Your Worship."

Leia's glance was long, measuring. "I know."

The silence lengthened uncomfortably. Han gave a self-conscious cough. "Um. Yes. Well, what about the droids? We might need them for information retrieval."

Leia shrugged. "They'd be very useful, Han. But they're of even more use to the Alliance here. Some of the information on surveillance, security, and espionage Artoo dredged out of the Death Star computer is priceless. Since Artoo and Threepio are needed to develop and translate the information, they're much too valuable to risk. They'll be in conference with our strategists 'til the last possible minute, then they'll be evacuated on the first available ship."

Han thought a moment, nodded. He turned his attention back to Luke. "Okay,

now for you, kid. By now the Imps'll have photos of you circulating on their 'Wanted' list. So once we board the *Falcon* let's darken your hair and shade your eyes grey."

"Photos of me? On a 'Wanted' list? But how would they know who I am?"

"Listen, kid," Han put his hand on Luke's shoulder and explained patiently, "we broke outta the worst mothering fortress in the Empire. You better believe there were spyeyes and microtapers hidden all every-which-where in that spacestation, and they were tied into Security Command Central back at Fleet Headquarters. With the way luck'll run from now on, you'll see posters of yourself with a price on your head wherever we go."

Luke gulped. "I see. I'll dye my hair and eyes and soon as we board."

Han nodded. "Chewie's readying the *Falcon* for take-off. Shall we join him?" He waved Luke and Leia aboard. Leia climbed the ramp and Luke started to follow. Han put out a hand to detain him. "Don't say anything to Leia, but it's just as well she's coming with us," he said gently.

Luke looked at him doubtfully.

"Use your brains," Han said. "If we fail, and this base is destroyed, at least Leia will be safe with us." Luke's eyes widened and he nodded in sudden understanding. Smiling grimly, Han added, "Now get up there before Her Glory gets suspicious. I gotta make a last minute check-up." *And you'll be safe, too, kid.* It was the best Han could do.

Luke joined Leia at the top of the ramp. Then he called, "Han, will I need a new identity, too?"

Han looked up, considered a minute, then shook his head. "Nah, kid. They may have your photos, but even in this day and age it takes more than two days to match up IDs." He hesitated. Then,

as sympathetically as possible, he added, "Fact of the matter is, Luke, from what you told me, when they raided your uncle's holding they didn't even bother with IDs. All they were after were the droids."

The Corellian shrugged. "Jawas ain't concerned with names. All they woulda told the stormtroopers was where the droids were. So, unless you introduced yourself to every clone-mother's son aboard the Death Star, you should. . . "

Han paused. Luke and Leia had exchanged stricken glances. Han got a sudden familiar, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He shook his head, closed his eyes. "No. Tell me it isn't so. Luke? You didn't."

"Only to Leia."

"Only to Leia." Han nodded and opened his eyes. "Only to Leia. What exactly did you say? And where?"

"I--I don't remember."

Leia looked ready to start cursing again. "In my cell, Han. He came in and took off the trooper's helmet he was wearing. He said, 'I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you.' Then he said, 'I've got your R2 unit. I'm here with Ben Kenobi.'"

Han looked up at Luke. He shook his head in disbelief. "Luke, I love ya like a brother. But if the Empire don't get you, I will. I'll strangle you with my bare hands, Luke. With my bare hands."

PART TWO: Cinninnatus
Y64M5D22/23Hr2200-0300ST
Hr1100-2200Local

Leia's time sense had been adversely

affected by the trip from Massassi to Dardanel. By pushing the *Falcon* to the limit all the way, Han had made the trip in only nine hours, landing the ship mid-morning local time of the same day they had left Yavin system. It gave Leia a strange feeling, almost as though she'd arrived at her destination even before she'd left the rebel base.

Now Leia's internal clock insisted that it was late afternoon, that the sun should be riding low in the sky, almost ready to set. Instead, when the elevators doors opened and Han led her and Luke to roof-top lounge where they were to meet Jasne Makaval, she was momentarily blinded by the bright morning sun washing in through the uninterrupted expanse of glass walls and reflecting off the glassteel bar and tables.

As her eyes adjusted to the dazzling brilliance, Leia could see a panorama of skyhighs, ribboned slide-walks and belt-ways, and glinting ships flickering in and out over the distant port. She almost felt that if she stared long enough she'd see the orbiting dry-dock high above Cinninnatus; impossible, of course, but. . .

"I could touch a cloud," she heard Luke's awe-struck whisper.

"You could do that in an X-wing, too," Leia said, desperately trying to sound unimpressed. What princess worth her title would--she flicked a glance at Luke. Were her eyes as big as his? Probably. Alderaan, with its sedate city-parks and limited population, had not prepared her for this rabbit-warren of a city with its mazes of slide-walks, its canyoned streets, its crowds. Not even Tavarsan, the Imperial capital, could compete with the millenia-old city of Cinninnatus for size and variety.

And if I, with all my exposure to alien worlds and cultures, am impressed, what must Luke-- she glanced over at him again. With seeming reluctance, he tore his gaze from the sweeping view and turned to her.

"It's not the same," he said simply, in answer to her comment. Leia smiled and nodded wordlessly. She knew what he meant.

"If you two are through acting like tourists--" Han's cynical voice crashed Leia back to reality. She'd almost forgotten why she was here.

Leia curiously examined the diverse creatures, both human and alien, involved in various stages of their chosen public and private pleasures. No mechanicals could be seen--whether by design or accident she did not know. Han had been evasive when she'd asked how to recognize Jasne Makaval, telling her only to look for "the most stunning woman in the room."

Leia spied her immediately. From the gasp to her left, Luke did, too.

The woman was facing the door through which they had just come. She was casually leaning back with her elbows on the edge of the circular bar, and was half-seated on the tall stool. Her dark green dress, tightly sleeved and demurely high-collared, was slit to display a long and shapely length of leg in brilliant yellow thigh-high boots.

Leia's eyes, unwillingly trapped by the vibrant color, travelled up the woman's very good figure to a pale, strongly boned face framed in fiery copper hair. Whatever Leia'd expected a notorious, high-priced thief to look like, this wasn't it.

The woman's eyes followed their approach.

"Hello, Jasne," Han said. "Nice to see you again."

Jasne Makaval studied Han through her lashes, her eyes glinting cold-steel grey. "If it isn't the famous JoDar Kylan," she drawled, voice husky and dripping with a falsely purring sweetness. Her glance went past him to Leia and Luke. "And you've brought the children, too, I see."

"Ah, now, Makaval," Han said, "don't--"

Jasne glared at him and pushed herself away from the bar to stand facing him. She was almost tall enough to look him square in the eyes. "Forget the soothing syrup. I'm here for one reason and one only. You said business, lucrative business. Get to the point." She eyed Han for a second longer, then turned to face Leia and Luke.

Leia, looking up at Jasne's vivid face, was strongly tempted to hate the other woman on general principles. Unfortunately, that would neither add to Leia's own height, nor alter her features and coloring. She felt rather as she had during her first visit to the Imperial Court as a girl of fifteen--drab and insignificant; as Leia looked at Jasne an elusive memory related to that time struggled to surface.

Jasne returned Leia's stare, frowned slightly, and then turned back to Han. "But first," she said coldly, "who are the infants. And why?"

"Larens Olmes," Han said, indicating Luke with a jerk of the head. Luke nodded to Jasne and impatiently brushed a strand of darkened hair behind an ear. Han turned to put his hand on Leia's shoulder. "And this is my cousin, Sinah Andell."

Jasne dismissed Luke after a quick glance. She seemed far more interested in Leia, stepping forward to stare down at her intently. "So you're--Kylan's--'cousin'. are you?" Jasne tilted her head, and, after a moment's scrutiny of Leia's face, smiled. "I thought I recognized you."

Leia's eyes widened as that smile curved Jasne's wide mouth. Of course! Lady Jhellian Neloïy! All those years ago at the Imperial Court, the dark-skinned, raven-haired Lady Jhellian had been Imperial society's darling. Leia had admired the elegant Jhellian passionately, as the incarnation of everything the teen-aged princess was not.

She had been very sorry not to see the Lady at Court the following year.

Her flashing recognition was quickly masked, but Jasne's expression of subdued amusement deepened and Leia knew the redhead was well aware of the double-edged game being played.

"How perceptive of you," Jasne said. "So few people see beyond the hair and the legs." She put her hand under Leia's chin, tipping her head back. "But you always were a bright child."

Leia angrily twisted away from Jasne's gently restraining hand. "I don't need your condescension, thank you." Jasne made her very much aware that her casual clothes, borrowed for the trip, were scarcely in keeping with the elegance of their surroundings, that the hair-style she'd thought so practical, so flattering, was gauche and made her look much too young.

"No, I don't suppose you do," Jasne grinned, then sobered. "But perhaps you will accept my sympathy. I was sorry to hear about your family."

"Thank you," Leia said stiffly, her voice set. The redhead was everything Han had said she'd be, and then some. How had she learned of Alderaan's destruction so rapidly? They'd been monitoring the newstapes and knew the information had not yet been made public, so where-- The Alliance could certainly use her intelligence sources!

There was an awkward silence. Han signalled the reptilian barkeep and whispered an order to him.

Jasne shifted her attention. "Tell me, Kylan," she began, "what are you trying to pull this time?"

A touch on her arm reminded Leia that Luke was still there, listening with a slightly perplexed air. "Do you mean you know her, too?" he asked.

"Oh, Luke," said Leia impatiently.

Han directed a sharp look to Leia and Luke. "Sinah, Larens, I think you're both forgetting where you are. I told you to be careful." He stressed their cover names, then returned to his attempt at brief explanation. "Look, Jasne, I told you--"

"Exactly nothing," Jasne said. She picked up the drink the barkeep put in front of her, handing the others theirs. Luke took a cautious sip of the softly glimmering purple liquid, instantly looked relieved. Suspicious, Leia tasted her drink. She almost choked on the sweetness. Candied fruit juice! Damn it! She was not a child! She glared at Han, who remained oblivious.

Jasne shot another look at Leia. "This isn't your usual kind of tangle, Kylan."

Han looked around. When he spoke, his voice was low. "And this isn't exactly the right place to talk business, is it?"

"When and where then?" Jasne said.

"My ship," Han said. "Now."

Jasne stiffened, her carefully casual attitude vanishing. "You didn't," she said flatly. "It's bad enough that you had the gall to come back here. Even your effrontery must have a limit."

Leia hid a grin. *Not likely*, she thought.

It was Han's turn to lounge, relaxed and amused, against the bar. He casually drained his glass of an amethyst liquid Leia strongly suspected was not as innocuous as her own drink. "Changed the name, changed the markings, changed the--"

"You maniac." Jasne's tone was dispassionate. "And I suppose you changed Chewbacca into a cockroach while you were at it?"

Leia sternly repressed the laugh which

rose in her throat. The sudden image of a two-meter tall hairy cockroach with baby-blue eyes could not be ignored. Luke choked on his drink. "I thought they were friends," he whispered. Leia shrugged in bewilderment.

"For Morga's sake, Jasne," Han said heatedly, "Chewie's not the only wookiee in space. If worse comes to worst, I'll throw him in a tub of peroxide and make him dye his eyes yellow. But I don't see why I should have to. I've never yet had problems with this ID."

"There's always a first time," Jasne said.

"Not for some things, Makaval. Besides, you come through and we won't be here long enough to blow the cover. But if you're that worried about Chewie calling attention to us, he can stay shipboard until everything's over."

"Big of you."

"Not really," Han grinned. "He was planning on giving the engines a fast tune-up while pulling guard duty, anyhow."

Jasne's level gaze panned from Han to Leia to a still puzzled Luke. She shook her head slowly, the coppery helmet of hair gleaming in the sunlight. "You're mad, Kylan. Completely mad. You know Jabba's put a price on your head." She studied Leia thoughtfully, and pursed her lips. "And I shouldn't wonder if the Imperials aren't slightly unhappy with you right now, also."

She finished her drink in one practiced swallow. She put the empty glass on the bar and flashed an automatic smile at the barkeep, shaking her head when he asked if she wanted another drink. She turned to Han. Her face was closed, cold.

"Sorry, JoDar. I don't feel like running interference for you with your ex-employer. I've never been involved with Jabba, and I see now reason to

start now. You haven't told me a thing to make me consider working with you." Her grey eyes narrowed as she added, "And if you think I'm crazy enough to go anywhere near the *Falcon*--even if you have 'changed the markings'--you're even more insane than I thought. And that's going some."

She patted Han's cheek, the mocking, purring note back in her deep voice. "Don't call when you're in town, Kylan-Solo. I'll be off-planet." Jasne signalled the barkeep. "Have another drink--on me. My farewell to you." She unslung a yellow leather shoulder bag from her stool and opened it, taking out a handful of golden credits which she tossed on the bar. They rang metallically over the sound of scattered conversations. Seeing and hearing organs focused on Han and Jasne from all sections of the lounge.

"Makaval, cut it out!" Han said with low-voiced urgency. He straightened and looked around suspiciously, noting the intent stares, the curious glances, the unabashed attempts at eavesdropping. "And anyway, all we're asking you to do is steal, for Morga's sweet sake! It's not like we want you to spy or turn reb or anything."

Leia deemed it time to interfere. Raising her hand slightly, she caught and held Jasne's attention. "You're a business woman, Jhell-Jasne. What's your normal scale for a high-risk, speed essential job?"

Jasne smiled, bowed her head slightly to acknowledge Leia's hit. "10,000 credits plus 5000 for risk and 2500 penalty pay for speed."

"We'll double it."

Jasne whistled softly. "35,000 for one job? You are persuasive, Sinah Andell." She perched on the stool, leaned back against the bar once more. She eyed the Corellian challengingly. "You're involved in something big, Kylan." She shook her head decisively

as Han started to answer. "And no, I do not want to know anything more about it. At least, not yet." She studied Han for several seconds. Her measuring gaze moved to Leia, to Luke. Finally she nodded. "All right. For 35,000 credits I can even stand you, Kylan. At least for a while. I'll listen to your scheme."

Leia flashed a glowing smile at Han, who frowned and shook his dark head. "She hasn't agreed to a thing, Sinah. Not yet, at least." Han's anxious gaze raked the room. He frowned. "Look, Jasne," he said in a low, hurried voice, "this still isn't the place to talk business. If you don't want to go to the *Falcon*, say when and where. We'll be there."

Jasne did not respond immediately. In the tense silence, the clicking of a glass being set on the bar next to her sounded loudly. The redhead handed Han his drink. Turning to Leia, she studied her from watchful, steel-grey eyes. Leia returned Jasne's gaze steadily. "Does he speak for you?" Jasne said at last, nodding in Han's direction.

Leia did not even glance at the Corellian. "He does."

Jasne's eyes locked with Leia's for several more seconds. At last the older woman nodded and turned to Han. "All right, I'll listen." She held up her hand to silence him as he started to speak. "You're right. Not here."

She called the barkeep over and whispered instructions to him, pointing to Luke and Leia. The reptilian nodded his massive head and padded off, returning shortly with two small duralumin cassette players. He handed one to Luke, the other to Leia. Betraying no curiosity in the proceedings, he then waddled off to care for another customer's concerns.

"If we all take off together, it's bound to attract attention." Jasne shrugged, flashed her wide, lazy smile at Luke and Leia. "After all, I don't

usually concern myself with the infantry." She turned to the Corellian. "On the other hand, if you and I disappear together, JoDar, people may wonder at my sudden lack of taste, but that's all."

Han nodded, evincing no anger at the insult. "All right. Just remember I have to see Jabba this evening." He smiled ruefully at Jasne's look of inquiry. "If I want to continue breathing, I do. And I've grown rather accustomed to that. . . to breathing, that is."

Jasne smiled. "Yes, it is habit-forming." She turned her attention back to Leia and Luke, nodded toward the cassettes they held. "Those are ordinary tourguides, the kind any tourist can pick up at the port, at museums, at restaurants, anywhere. They have only one added refinement. They'll readmit you to this building, to the secret elevator, and to this lounge. Use them, children, with my blessings." She checked the bar chronometer, synchronized her time-piece. "We'll meet back here at 1900 standard hours."

"But won't it be dangerous, walking around town for the next six hours? What if we're sighted by a detail of storm-troopers?" Leia reached around Jasne to set her glass, still three-quarters full, on the bar.

Jasne raised a mocking brow. "Storm-troopers see only what they expect to see, Sinah. A scruffy little schoolgirl and her country-hick boyfriend will scarcely draw their attention."

Scruffy schoolgirl indeed! "Yes, but--"

"No. Believe me, my way is best. Have either of you been to Cinnцинatus before?"

Leia and Luke doubtfully glanced at each other. They shook their heads.

"I thought not. That's the reason I want you to play tourist. I may need your

help, and if you know nothing about the city, we'll be in trouble. So go. Enjoy Cinninnatus. Keep your eyes and ears open, watch, and remember where you've been."

"But why waste six hours of time? Leia asked. "Can't we 'see the city' in only two or three hours?"

Jasne nodded. "Probably. But if I take on this commission, I'm going to need that extra time to set up contacts and make arrangements."

Leia glanced sideways at Luke. He met her glance and shrugged in bewilderment. Her gaze passed on to Han. She'd acknowledged him openly before the red-head, but--no. She had to trust him. It was the only way. Han met her eyes calmly. His words echoed her thoughts.

"This may be your only chance, Sinah. Right now it's the only way open to you."

Leia nodded. "All right. We'll try it." Hefting her tourguide carefully, she turned to Luke. Her voice carried. "Larens, I want to see as much of the city as possible while we're here. Let's leave these love-birds," she slid a sly side-long glance at Jasne and Han, "to themselves."

Han was caught unawares in the middle of taking a drink. He choked, turned a deep purple to match the liquid in his glass. "Of all the fletchin'--damnnall," he whispered, "just wait. That's one I owe you, 'cousin' mine."

Jasne simply smiled, tilting her head slightly.

Leia shrugged, unaffected by either Han's sputtering threats or by Jasne's amused tolerance. "Coming, Larens?" Luke nodded. He set his empty glass on the bar and joined Leia. They walked to the waiting elevator.

*

Four hours later, a furious Leia strode down the walk-way connecting two of the small park-like squares that encircled the inner city like a green necklet. The tour had been bad enough; it had given more useless information about more sites of dubious interest than anyone could ever possibly want to explore.

But add to that Luke continuously putting them in danger--*All right, I helped. We shouldn't have discussed the destruction of the Death Star in public like that--*even in her anger a mischievous gleam appeared in Leia's eyes as she remembered the incredulous look of shocked hurt on Luke's face when she confessed that she'd been convinced he was a traitor, an Imperial spy, when he'd turned off the tracking computer--*and I certainly shouldn't have encouraged him to show me how the Force enabled him to form a topographical map of the city from the tour we'd been taking--him and his 'six spokes radiating from the center of the city, only two of which are safe to use in the event of discovery', indeed! But he didn't have to laugh at me when I rushed him out of the park. I know that young man in the mathematician's robe recognized him!!*

Any amusement Leia may have felt faded as she remembered again the shock of looking diagonally across the open square to see a brown-skinned young man gazing at Luke in open-eyed wonder--*and all Luke can do is tell me, "There's no danger, Leia. I would have known. Trust me."*

Trust him? Trust someone who didn't even have the sense to avoid using her real name in public? And where'd he pick up this "Trust the Force" business, anyway? All right, he's Force-gifted, but he'd had exactly one day's training with Obi-Wan. Surely it behooved him to move more cautiously, to learn his power, to consolidate it, before he tried to tackle more than he could handle?

And Luke's carelessness might be traceable to his naivete, his provincial-

ism, but what excuse did she have for her own actions? Surely she, of anyone, knew that death and betrayal sprang full-blown from the most unexpected soil! She thought of her brother Chalil, imprisoned on Llargerol for the past four years on treason charges brought by his well-beloved First Lady. She shivered.

Luke, scurrying to keep up with her, touched her arm. "Are you cold? Do you want my jacket?"

Leia shook her head, walked faster.

They entered another of the crowded, tree-lined squares which had been such a welcome change from the sharp-edged, strangely empty sterility of the financial district where the lounge was located. Luke paused, almost coming to a halt. A black-furred wookiee in the deep red uniform of the Imperial Special Police narrowly missed bumping into him and gave him a vitriolic glare as he cut around him. Luke hardly seemed to notice.

"Larens?" Leia said, slowly her own pace to match his. Luke might be willing to risk the use of real names in public, she was not.

Luke shook his head. "Nothing, I guess." They moved forward more briskly, but there was a slight frowning crease to his forehead. After a minute he stopped short.

Leia stopped beside him. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Luke said, looking around. "I just feel--funny. There's something, but I don't know what it--" He shook his head again. "It's nothing, I guess."

Leia looked at Luke consideringly. His attitude had changed drastically from one step to the next. Reaction to her warning? Or something much simpler? She put a hand on his arm. "You're just not used to big cities, Larens. That's probably all it is, no more than that."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Leia smiled reassuringly. The multi-hued, multi-specied crowd was streaming around them, and they were beginning to attract curious glances. "Then let's stop blocking pedestrian traffic."

They resumed progress across the square, Luke shamelessly staring, as he had been since they'd started their walk. Leia had to admit that Jasne had been right. They seemed a couple of gawking tourists, and yet Luke had been able to commit their path to memory. His tracking experience, augmented by the Force, was--

"Hey, Sinah, look at--"

Relieved that Luke seemed once again to be settling into his Larens Olnes persona, Leia obediently turned her head to see what he had discovered this time. As she did so, her glance fell on a figure just entering the square.

For a horribly long moment she was frozen, unable to move or breathe. Then she managed to suck in air and say "LUKE!" in a harsh, urgent whisper.

Luke's head snapped around at her use of his real name. He stared across the square. "NO!"

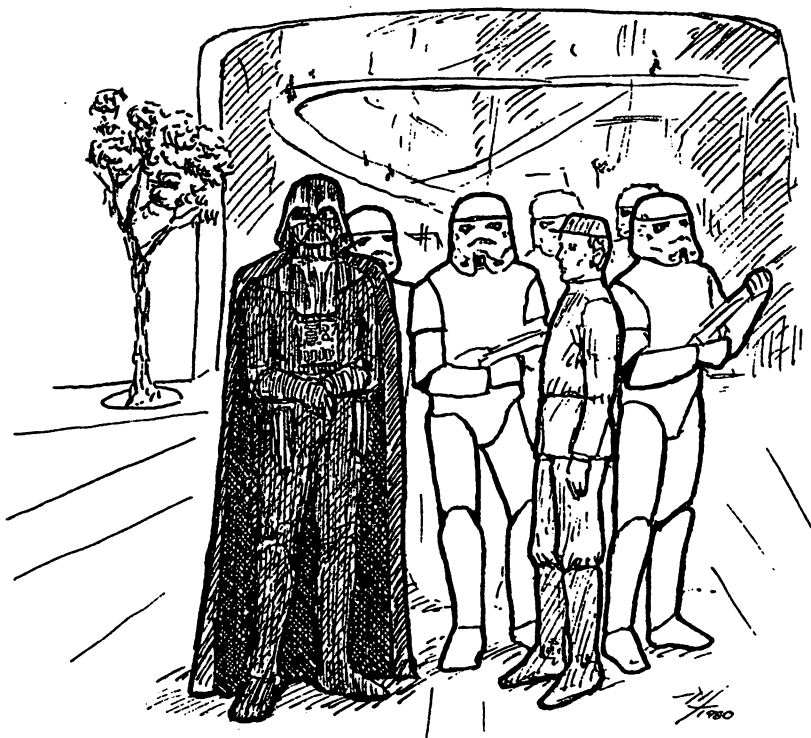
Luke and Leia looked at one another for a horrified second. Then Luke grabbed Leia's wrist and pulled her back to press close behind the nearest tree.

"Do you think he saw us?" said Luke, releasing Leia.

"I hope not," Leia said fervently, rubbing her wrist where the marks of Luke's fingers stood out clearly. "We'll know in a minute." They cautiously peered around the tree trunk.

Lord Darth Vader, surrounded by a guard of twelve storm-troopers, strode through the square.

"I don't think he--he's stopping!"



said Luke, pushing Leia behind him. "Look, there's a Port Authority officer. Why are they stopping in the middle of the square?"

"How do I know?" Leia whispered fiercely. "Let me see!" She shoved away the arm Luke had flung protectively across her, pushed in front of him, and risked a look. Lord Vader was nodding at something the grey-clad port official had said.

"What's he doing here, anyway? He's supposed to be dead!" Luke gripped Leia's shoulder as he spoke.

"Well, he obviously isn't," Leia hissed back. The Dark Lord might be well out of earshot, but they were both whispering.

Leia and Luke stared at the dark figure of Darth Vader. Luke's hand gradually tightened on Leia's shoulder. She looked up at him. His face was hard, an incongruous expression on his normally open, friendly features.

"He killed Ben," Luke said. "He killed my father." His free hand went to his belt, but his lightsaber did not hang there. Leia breathed a prayer of thanks for Han's foresight in insisting that Luke leave it well-hidden aboard the *Falcon*, but looking at the set of Luke's face and body she knew a cold stab of fear.

"Luke, no!" She jerked out of his hold and grabbed his hand, deliberately digging her nails into his skin.

"Hey!" Luke pulled his hand free and looked at her accusingly.

"Sorry, Luke, but you--you looked as if your next step would be out there." Leia nodded her head in the direction of the group clustered around Vader.

Luke gazed at the Dark Lord. "I'm going to kill him."

"Are you crazy? You wouldn't get

three feet. The Alliance needs you alive, Luke, not dead."

Luke took a deep breath, his eyes fixed on Vader. "All right, I'll kill him later. But I'm going to get him, Leia. I swear it." His narrowed gaze remained on Vader, who had waved the Port officer off and was now moving with long strides to the far entrance of the square, away from Luke and Leia. The depth of hatred in Luke's blue eyes was unnerving.

"And I'll help you," Leia said. "Later. Right now, we have a job to do, and we can't toss it aside for our own pleasure."

"Yeah, I know." Some of the tension drained from Luke's body. He looked after Vader's retreating form consideringly. "What's Vader doing here, anyway?"

"Filling out reports by the shipload, I should think," Leia said. "He's here for the same reason we are--Cinninnatus is the largest Imperial port in the sector. Damn!"

They watched in silence until Vader reached the perimeters of the park.

"Whew," said Luke. He and Leia slumped in relief against the tree.

"It's okay for now," Leia said softly, putting her hand on Luke's arm. "He's going and--oh, no. Now what?"

Vader had halted at the entrance to the square. He stood quietly for a moment, waving his escort to silence. Then his head turned and he looked back over the crowded square. The dark, staring mask seemed to be pointed straight in Leia and Luke's direction. Vader tilted his head to one side, almost as though listening to something.

Luke's face cleared. He, too, seemed to listen, then he grabbed Leia's hand firmly. "Come on, Ben says we have to get out of here."

"I don't need Ben to tell me that," Leia snapped, letting the implications of Luke's remark pass. She set her weight against Luke's impetuous tug. "Walk slowly. We can't attract attention."

Luke hesitated, nodded reluctantly. Leia forced herself to stroll unconcernedly to the edge of the park. She expected to be halted at any second by an armed storm-trooper or, even worse, by Darth Vader's black-gloved hand on her shoulder.

They reached the entranceway to the slide-walk without incident and headed back to the roof-lounge by a circuitous that would throw any chance followers off the scent. It was nearly dinner-time, and the lounge was considerably thinner of customers than it had been earlier. The darkening sky was visible through the window-wall. Glowlights had been lit and warmed the glassteel bar, beat against the warm orange rug.

Leia looked around eagerly. Luke put a protective arm around her shoulder and said, "I don't see Han or Jasne."

Leia checked her chronometer. "It still wants an hour till they're due back. Damn."

Luke started at Leia's profanity. She shrugged off his arm angrily. *I am what I am. And if Luke wants to worship shadows, let him. I don't have time to play Lady Beguiling.*

She stalked over to the bar and hoisted herself onto one of the tall stools. The barkeep came over to her. "Oiska!" She ordered the strongest drink she could think of. Unblinking reptilian eyes weighed her measuringly, then the barkeep shrugged and poured her drink. He put a glass of rust-colored alcohol in front of her, collected her credit, and trundled off.

Luke joined her and looked at the drink disapprovingly. "Sinah, do you--"

Leia took a healthy swallow of oiska and choked as the acid rot-gut burned her throat. Eyes tearing, she glanced around. They were isolated to one end of the bar. She turned on Luke angrily, the emotions that had been building over the afternoon surfacing.

"I don't approve of this protective conspiracy," she said through tight lips. "You, Han, Chewbacca. Even Willard and Dodonna." She drew a ragged breath, and forced herself to take another swallow of the oiska in an attempt to relax her tensed muscles. "Try to understand. I have been an active part of the political underground since I attained my Senatorial seat. That's four years of danger, and of run-ins with Tarkin, Vader, and their ilk. I am neither naive nor helpless."

"No, but--"

"No buts. I am able to take care of myself. But not if I'm constantly being thrown off my guard by concerned idiots. And not when those same idiots make my situation even more precarious than necessary by vainglorious stupidity."

"But Han--"

Leia shook her head. "Not Han. You. You were ready to risk your life, and our mission, for a chance--an almost impossible chance--of revenge."

Luke squirmed in his seat. "He killed--"

The oiska and the emotional charge of safety after danger released a flood of anger in Leia. She slammed her hand on the bar. "Don't tell me about Ben and your father," she said. Each word was edged in brittle glass. "You never knew them. How strong can your hatred be? Vader stood by and made me watch while my whole world was destroyed. I would gladly consign him to the lowest pits of hell--even if it meant that I had to be chained there with him. But Luke," her eyes held the young man's for a long, steady minute, "I'd seduce, I'd

marry him if it would ensure a final, Tasting victory for the Alliance."

Shock and distaste flared in Luke's eyes. He quickly shuttered them and turned a stony profile to Leia. She shook her head in self-disgust. Damn! She knew he came from a provincial, puritanical background and that Han was right about his worship of her royal image. Couldn't she have found a less brutal, less direct way to explain her resolute dedication to him? *No. He has to grow up. And I can't be afraid to be myself, to speak my mind.*

Luke called the barkeep over, and with a slanting glance at Leia, ordered a glass of the same candied fruit juice they'd been served earlier. Bristling at the deliberate insult she read in his actions, Leia turned her back on him.

By the time the elevator disgorged Han and Jasne, Leia had finished two glasses of oiska and was well on her way to finishing a third. She was still ignoring Luke and was unabashedly studying the lounge and its habitués. She felt peculiarly alert and perceptive and directed her attention to Han and Jasne.

Han still maintained his JoDar Kylan persona, but he had changed his clothes. He now wore a silver-shot black-silk body-shirt open halfway to the waist and black leather pants that fit like skin.

Leia knew it was only the oiska, but she felt an urge to unbutton the fourth button on his shirt and once again run her hands across his hard-muscled chest, to play with the cruciform pendant that hung--Leia's eyes narrowed. The Brevet of Criala? What was a Corellian smuggler doing with an Imperial medal of honor? *Probably stole it*, she thought blearily, seeing no reason to stop her appreciative survey of his very obvious male charms. *It was good to have a man again*, she thought to her old love, *and you'd like that damn Corellian. There's something of you in*

him. . .

Han's knee-boots and holster had been recently hand waxed. His blaster, too, gleamed like new. Leia frowned. Surely Han was dressed too well just to visit an ex-employer? If the four red cash boxes he'd received from the Alliance weren't piled on the anti-grav sled hovering behind him, Leia'd think him dressed for a night on the town, rather than for a business meeting.

Leia glanced down at herself, fingered the rough homespun of her borrowed blouse. Her eyes automatically sought out Jasne, at Han's side. Jasne was also in black; a jumpsuit that seemed determined to show every pore. Low-heeled boots and a wide, silver-buckled, compartmented belt completed the outfit, and she carried a backpack in one hand. The older woman looked deadly, efficient, and beautiful.

They suit one another. With Jhell-Jasne at his side Han has no need for-- Leia decided she was being maudlin. She waved her glass in greeting as Han and Jasne joined her. Han's glance flicked from Leia to Luke, and he frowned. "Anything wrong?" His voice was worried.

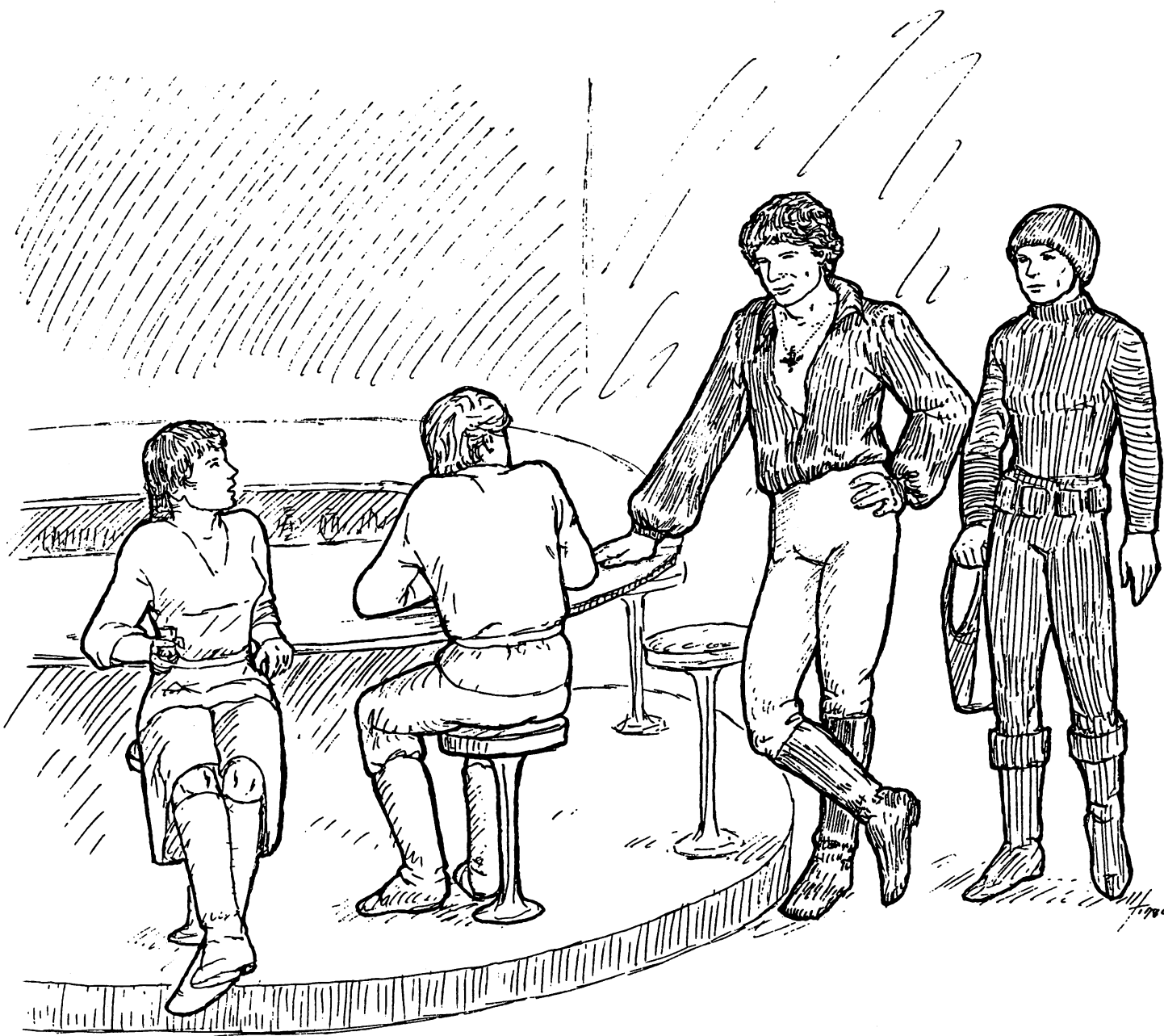
Leia raised her chin. "Why should anything be wrong?"

Han looked with studied deliberation from the glass in Leia's hand to Luke's stiffened back. He folded his arms across his chest. "Well?"

Leia bit her lip. "I'm celebrating," she said defiantly.

"Celebrating what?" Han demanded. "Luke looks like he lost the rebellion singlehandedly and you--you, Your Worshipfulness, are what is known in polite society as 'drunk'."

Leia slid a side-long glance to Luke, but he kept his face turned away. She squared her shoulders, looked Han straight in the face. "I'm celebrating our escape from Darth Vader."



Han and Jasne froze. At last Jasne said in an extremely polite, quietly chilling voice, "I beg your pardon?"

Han shook his head in quick negation. "No. He's dead. He died in the explosion of the Death Star," he said in a desperate, not-too-convinced tone.

If the situation weren't so serious, Leia would have enjoyed the look of horror on Han's face. "No. We saw him in one of the Green Isle areas."

Han closed his eyes. "Leia, tell me you're drunker than I thought and this is one of your hallucinations."

Luke spun on his stool and faced Han. "Vader was talking to a Port official," he corroborated.

Han turned to Jasne. "A clone?" he asked, without much conviction.

Jasne gave a look of disgust, then glanced at him accusingly. "You did it again, Kylan. You suckered me in royally. Why didn't you warn me Vader was involved in this?"

Han shook his head hopelessly. "We thought he was dead. He should be dead. He should have gone out with the Death Star."

Grey eyes snapping angrily, Jasne snorted, "I'd never accept Vader's death as fact unless I carved out his heart myself--and even then I'd leave room for doubt." She looked to Leia, who had been fuzzily following this exchange. "You'd be well-served in I considered contract broken for this."

Leia was suddenly, sickeningly sober. "But--"

Jasne smiled grimly. "Don't worry. I gave JoDar my word and I'll keep it. But next time, make sure the facts are known to all the contract parties."

Han brushed Jasne's acid comments aside. "It's a good thing we got here

when we did," he said. "If Vader was talking to a port official, he's finalizing his plans to attack the base. If your ships get here on schedule, Sinah, and nothing else goes wrong, you should just make it back in time to evacuate your last personnel before the first wave of attack squadrons hits."

Leia nodded. That was an awfully big if.

A terrified expression crossed Han's face. "Did Vader see either of you?"

Disagreement and pique forgotten, Leia looked guiltily at Luke. Han grimaced. "Kid, if you tell me you walked up to him and introduced yourself, so help me, I'll--"

Luke smiled wanly. "No, but--"

The whole story came out. Han sighed in relief on hearing that Vader had no direct knowledge of Luke and Leia. Luke's insistence that he knew Vader had sensed something he laughingly dismissed as the result of an overactive imagination. When Luke said in aggrieved tones, ". . .and she said she'd marry him," Han grinned widely.

Han smiled crookedly at Leia. "Right. What do you do then, lady? Strangle him with your hair on your wedding night?"

"Why not?" Leia said, tossing her head back defiantly. The still new feeling of lightness reminded her forcibly of the masses of dark hair lying on the floor of her quarters at the base. "Oh, shit!" She ran her fingers through the close-cropped curls, then shrugged and grinned. "Let's hope the wedding isn't too soon, or I may never get the chance to be a widow."

Luke's face had begun to lighten at Han's comment. Now he caught Leia's eye. He grinned at her shyly. Relieved, Leia smiled back at him.

Jasne shook her head, a look of amused cynicism on her face. "If the

squabble is over, children, let's take a table and work out the details of this job."

She got the barkeep's attention and pointed to a secluded table off to one side of the bar. The barkeep nodded, and Jasne led them to it. Han sat in the chair facing the door, Jasne in the chair opposite his. Luke and Leia took the two remaining seats.

The barkeep set drinks in front of them, and Leia noted with disgust that she was back to fruit juice. The barkeep whispered in Jasne's ear. She nodded and he waddled off.

"All right, the distorter is on. First things first." Jasne glanced at Leia. "There is, I believe, the slight matter of 35,000 credits?"

Leia nodded. She reached into her belt pouch and pulled out a piece of parchment. "Here's a letter of credit drawn on one of the Alliance's dummy accounts. I'll just fill it in and--"

Jasne put her hand over Leia's. "Sorry, Sinah Andell. No letter of credit. In this kind of deal, put nothing in writing." Jasne settled back in her chair, raised one brow questioningly. "Surely you can do better than that?"

Leia looked at the letter of credit. "But it's valid. It's authentic. You'll have no trouble cashing it."

"Nothing in writing," Jasne repeated.

"All right." Leia checked her chronometer. 2000 hours local time. Early evening. But in a major financial area. . . "Where's an open bank? I'll get you your cash."

Jasne shook her head. "It's a bank holiday."

"A what?" Leia said disbelievingly.

"A bank holiday," Jasne repeated

helpfully. Leia was willing to swear the other woman was enjoying her distress. "You saw how deserted the financial district was when you walked through it."

"Well, of course I did," Leia snapped. "But I also thought that if it were anything important you'd have warned me about it. I thought the banks here never closed!"

Jasne shrugged. "Every fourth day-week is a bank holiday."

Leia gritted her teeth in fury. "And today is the fourth dayweek. "Damn!" She glared at the redhead. "You couldn't tell me this?"

"How was I to know you'd be naive enough to pay me with a letter of credit?"

Leia took a drink of the amethyst-colored fruit juice. She was so lost in thought she didn't even make a face at the overpowering sweetness. She studied Jasne thoughtfully. "What if I give you a letter of mark? I'll get the cash to you first thing tomorrow morning."

Jasne shook her head. "No credit. Not in this profession, Sinah."

"But I guarantee you'll get your money. Word of an Orga--of an Alderaan."

"Neither of which are worth anything anymore," said Jasne bluntly.

Leia eyed Jasne coldly and tilted her chin up.

"Hey," said Luke, "you can't talk to her that way."

"Why not?" Jasne's tone was disinterested.

"Because she's a princess and a senator and--" Han reached out and put his hand over Luke's mouth.

Jasne looked at Luke, brow raised. "Princess of what, Larens? The biggest asteroid collection in six systems?"

Luke's face reddened. Leia's shoulders sagged for a second.

"Alderaan is gone--" Leia stopped. When she resumed her speech, her voice was steady, her shoulders straight. "Alderaan is gone, but the Alliance isn't. I hold my rank from them now. I have the authority and the financial backing, don't worry about that."

"Yeah," said Luke, "and she--"

Han eyed Jasne, and elbowed Luke's ribs. "Shut up, Larens. And you, too, Sinah. You both talk too much." He gestured to the bar with his chin. "Lucky for all of us the distorter's on and Jasne's in semi-contract status." He turned to Jasne. "Look, Makaval," he said persuasively, "forget all that rebel-Alderaan nonsense the kids have been feeding you. This is a straight business proposition. There's no risk involved. Sinah is good for the money."

Jasne smiled slightly and shook her head. "The answer is still no. Nothing is ever so definite in our business that there's 'no risk'. You know that, JoDar. No credit." She switched her gaze to Luke. "And Larens, I know you're new at this. But please, when JoDar's been to such trouble to establish a new identity for you, and for. . . Sinah, don't be so eager to reveal who you really are."

"But you know who we really are. Why pretend?"

"Maybe I know. Maybe I don't. Some advice, Larens. And this I'll give to you free. One, don't accept anything at face value. Two, don't act on presumption. Three, don't admit to anything." She started to rise. "If there's nothing more--"

Leia put out a hand, gripped the other woman's arm. "Let me be sure I have this straight. Before you get us the 'supplies' we need, you want 35,000 credits in cash?"

"Cash or kind. But on kind there's

a 20% markup." Jasne sat down once more.

"It could be a 100% markdown for all the good it'll do us!" Luke muttered angrily, shifting in his chair.

Leia impatiently shushed him with a quick gesture. "So all we have to do is find someone to advance us 35,000 credits?"

Jasne smiled wryly. "If you care to think of that as 'all', yes."

Leia's eyes darkened angrily. "We've come this far. I don't intend to be defeated now by greed."

Han started to protest, but Jasne stopped him with a quick shake of the head. She turned to Leia. "Greed? No, Sinah. Routine business sense. You said it yourself. I'm a business woman. I'm not given to charity benefits. You pay me, I'll deliver. If you can't come up with the cash--" She shrugged. "Goodbye --and good luck."

"All right. If we can't go to a bank, what about a usurer?"

"A two-for-one?" Han said incredulously. "No way!"

"Why not?" Leia's lips tightened and she raised her chin.

Han was beginning to feel harassed. He distractedly ran a hand through his dark curls. "Never again do I give lessons in criminal behavior," he announced to the air. "If they didn't learn the tricks of the trade at their mother's knee, let them stay honest." He shifted his chair closer to Leia. "Look, Sinah. Two-for-ones are businessmen, just like the rest of us. And this," he flicked the letter of credit contemptuously with one finger, "means nothing to them."

Jasne had been sitting at her ease, observing the proceedings with an amused smile on her face. Still smiling, she

leaned forward, put her hand over the letter of credit. "Sinah, the two-for-ones want collateral. And paper money is not what they mean. They want real-estate, gem-stones, ore, ships. Before they disgorge a credit, they want either a sole-owner mortgage or a transfer of ownership. Can you provide either?"

Numbly, Leia shook her head. Real property? Her family holdings had been entirely on Alderaan, and the estates, her fiancé's, which had been settled on her at their betrothal, were now Imperial property. Personal wealth? She'd not been exaggerating when she told Han she had nothing, not even the clothes she stood in. She just hoped a stipend went with that "Princess of the Alliance" title. Somehow, she thought that the job market for rebel princesses was rather limited.

Han looked thoughtful. He prodded the a-grav sled with his boot and it skittered away. He hooked a toe under it and pulled it back toward himself. He looked at Leia measuringly. Alderaan was one of the wealthiest planets in the galaxy, Sinah. Surely there were Alderaan business ties with Dardanel."

Leia nodded. "Many."

"Then can't--"

Leia shook her head. "Morally, my brother Chalil and I are heirs to Alderaan's unclaimed off-planet wealth. But we'll never collect." Her face was drawn, old beyond her twenty-two years. "Traitors can't own anything, JoDar. Their property reverts to the Crown."

Han looked from Leia to Luke, shrugged. "We can always rob a bank."

"We may have to. Our transports will be here in eighteen hours and we still haven't. . . ." Leia's glance fell on the a-grave. She sat suddenly still, and her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Damnall, yes! Why didn't I think of that before?" She leaned toward Han. "Lend me 35,000 credits."

A look of stony horror settled on Han's face. "What did you say?"

"Lend me 35,000 credits," she repeated. She gestured to the a-grav unit. "You've 40,000 credits right there."

"I need that. My neck depends on getting that money to Jabba."

"Larens says you only owe Jabba 15,000 credits."

Han glared at Luke, who shamefacedly smiled and ducked his head. "Larens doesn't know everything, Sinah."

"How much do you owe?" Leia persisted.

"35. . . that's scarcely to the point. Let's say I owe him enough that he's already put a price on my head. And if I don't get him paid off now, that price'll probably double."

"But you don't have to pay him to-night," Leia insisted.

Han looked at Leia bleakly. "With his network, Jabba knew I was on Dardanel within a nanosecond of my landing. I've got to contact him, before he thinks I'm playing sick games, and thumbing my nose at him. That's all I need. Jabba to call his army of space-bos out after me. We'll never get those ships, then."

Leia could feel her entire plan slipping through her fingers. She resolutely squared her shoulders. She was not going to be defeated by two criminals' notions of good business practices!

"JoDar, look, if you--"

*

Two acriminonious hours later, Han pushed back his chair angrily. He glared at Leia, "Chaos take you if this doesn't work."

Leia's glowing smile included a quietly amused Jasne, a disgruntled Han, and overwhelmed Luke. She nodded toward the a-grav. "Jasne, I believe that's now yours."

"Hold it. Do you mind if I take out my 5000 credits? I'm not about to donate more to your damn cause than I have to." Han pulled the anti-gravity unit close, picked up one of the containers, and fed in the lock combination. Opening the container, he carefully counted out 5000 credits, pocketed it, and shut the container again. He made Jasne a mocking little half-bow from his seat. "Now it's yours, Makaval."

Jasne nodded, a mocking smile twisting her wide mouth. She beckoned the barkeep over and entrusted the secured containers to his care. As soon as he was out of range of the distorter she said, "Business may commence," in the ancient contract form of the independent merchant.

"From now until completion, let this contract bind." Han spoke the ritual words of response.

Leia breathed a sigh of relief and settled back in her chair. Han had carefully explained this step to her on the trip out from Massassi. Jasne now considered herself honor-bound to deliver the 'merchandise' they had contracted for--and only death, or a betrayal of honor of their part, could cancel the agreement. Despite Dodonna and Willard's hesitation, dealing with those outside the law certainly had advantages. She'd rather a 'till-death-do-us-part' contract like this than a 35-day warranty anytime.

Two or three times during Leia's marathon argument with Han, the barkeep had unobtrusively refilled their glasses. Leia's was still untouched from the last time. She picked it up heedlessly, took a deep swallow. She made a face, pushed the drink away. She was not in the mood for soft drinks!

She leaned over and picked up Han's half-full glass. She gulped down the pale liquid. She gagged and looked at Han in shocked disbelief. "Fruit juice?" she asked disgustedly.

Han glanced at her, took back his glass. "Sinah, I'm a pilot!" He turned back to Jasne.

"Are you still going to see Jabba?" the thief asked.

"I have to." He reached across the table, picked up the letter-of-credit. He put it in his belt-pouch. "With this, I may be able to convince him to give me an extension until tomorrow."

Jasne nodded. "All right. But first come with me to the spaceport. I have to know what ships you want so I can get you the right documentation."

Han agreed readily. Jasne looked across at Luke. Without preamble she asked, "How would I get to the intersection of Varselt and Drindale?" Luke's eyes glazed and he answered her question without hesitation. Jasne nodded, threw several more questions at him. Luke fielded all of her questions easily. Jasne tried the same tactics on Leia, who only floundered in confusion as she tried to remember the routes they'd taken that afternoon.

Jasne cut glances with Han, gave a rueful smile. "All right, Larens, you come with me for backup and support." She unsnapped one of the pockets on her belt and took out a small key which she passed across to Leia. "Wait here for an hour, Sinah. Then go to my apartment and wait for us there." She gave Leia the address, made her repeat it several times.

Leia protested. "But why--"

"Sinah, someone has to stay behind. If our plan backfires and we're caught, you'll have to warn off your troopships. Can you use you 2KLM92 comset?" Leia nodded. "All right. If rendezvous

time approaches and we've not returned, go to the far wall of the living area. Going counter-clockwise from the top, touch the four corners of the Narakawba portrait and recite the phrase 'Colay terni may'. Use the comset to contact your men."

Han nodded his approval and added, "Then get to the *Falcon* as fast as possible and tell Chewie to cut out-- to get the hell off planet, fast!"

Leia looked from Han to Jasne to Luke. She bit her lips over further protest. Jasne was right. Someone had to be available to warn off the incoming troops. It was only common sense that she be the one to remain behind--but that didn't mean she had to like it. *Always safe, behind the lines. . .*

She closed her hand over the key. "I agree."

Jasne glanced from Luke to Han. "Shall we get started then? Larens, you leave first. Meet us at the Port Observation Deck."

Luke got up, leaned across the table. "For luck," he said in an embarrassed voice as he kissed Leia on the forehead. He moved toward the elevator, and she watched him until the doors slid shut behind him.

Jasne said, "Don't worry. He'll be safe." She turned to Han. "You know where we'll be, JoDar. Try to get there at a decent hour." The elevator returned, empty. Jasne said her goodbyes, crossed to the waiting cage, entered.

Once the elevator doors closed behind her, Han stood. He hesitated selfconsciously. "Look, Sinah, I. . . "

Leia gazed back at him steadily. This moment might be final. "Han--" she hesitated, then settled for saying, "good luck."

Han nodded and turned to go. Leia

watched as he strode across the room to the elevator. Always watching the ones she cared about--some she loved--walk smiling into danger--her fiance, too, had-- She clenched her jaw against the urge to call him back. How much more must she sacrifice to the Alliance?

Half-way to the elevator, Han stopped short. A set, determined expression on his face, he came back to the table.

"Han, is anything--"

Han shook his head. Silently, he took Leia's chin between his thumb and forefinger. He raised her head, looked straight into her eyes. "Look, sister, I left a voice tape with Chewie. If anything happens, you get my share of the *Falcon*." He quirked his mouth. Leia knew it was supposed to be a grin, but it came out as a grimace of pain. "And knowing you," he added, "I left it in trust until you reach the age of discretion--which I put at 75. Otherwise, I know damn well you'd sell your share and give the money to the Alliance. Forget it. This is to keep you alive, Your Glory. Not to add pennies to the rebel coffers."

Leia reached up, closed her fingers over Han's wrist. "Han, no. I--"

"I'll see you around, kid." He gave her head a little shake, disengaged her hand. "And if I don't, Larens'll take care of you. Tell him I'll haunt him, else." He reached out to her again and for a second Leia thought he was going to caress her cheek. She closed her eyes. When she opened them, Han was no longer at her side. Leia glanced across the room. The elevator doors were just closing.

Leia took a deep breath, sat straight in her chair. She set her half-empty glass at a precise angle to the other glasses on the table, folded her hands patiently to wait the hour Jasne had ordered.

Princesses, after all, do not fidget.

First Movement

Leia surreptitiously checked her chronometer for the fourth time in less than half an hour. She nodded decisively and rose from her chair. It was not quite an hour since the others had left, but surely close enough that it'd make no difference.

She paid the tab and crossed to the elevator. She was, despite a rigidly imposed mask of calm, tense, keyed up. To her heightened senses the elevator took forever to reach her floor. When the door finally opened she brushed so precipitously past the tall man who was exiting that she almost overset him.

"What the--" He looked after her, indignation clearly visible on his face.

Leia pressed the down button and flicked an impersonal glance toward him. She stiffened. Tan face, sharp black eyes, and crisply curling mahogany hair formed a familiar whole. She'd know him anywhere. Pers Alterman, the former senator from Marreth, who'd had a sideline in trying to convince the Senate's very junior members that corruption was normal. It he recognized her. . .

She risked another glance. What in the name of the Unholy was he doing here? He'd dropped out of sight after that influence peddling scandal on Tavarsan, and-- The doors started to glide shut and Leia sighed in relief.

At the last minute, a long-fingered, well-manicured hand reached in, broke the beam. The doors reopened and Alterman entered the elevator.

He said nothing for several seconds, just stared at her. At last he gave a thin smile and pressed the down button.

The doors closed and the elevator descended. Alterman still said nothing, and Leia tried to avoid his steady gaze. The sharp, musky smell of his pomade permeated the confined area of the elevator cage.

Damnall, Solo! You really know how to pick rendezvous points. All I need now's Vader waiting outside--

Alterman reached out and Leia jerked her head backward, out of his reach. His smile widened, but did not warm his eyes. "Is my touch still so repugnant, Leia?"

Leia licked suddenly dry lips. Tension made her voice breathy and quite unlike her normally crisp tones. "I don't know what you--"

"Ah! You don't know what I mean, Leia? If you were what you seem, you'd have said you don't know who I am." He gave her an appraising stare, letting his eyes linger on her breasts and thighs. Her hands itched with the desire to slap him, to wipe that leering smirk off his face.

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. Leia tried to sidle past him, but he effectively blocked her way. "Oh, no, little Leia. Not this time. Neither Vader nor your tame ducal watchdog are here to afford you protection. This time you will answer to me for your actions."

Leia lifted her chin. "I answer to you for nothing."

Alterman raised a sardonic brow. "Abandoning the masquerade so soon?" His voice hardened. "You're taking away all my fun, Leia. I'd much rather have beaten the truth out of you."

Leia's furious gaze raked him from head to toe. He was as handsome as ever, with that indefinable air of selfish indulgence that screamed 'danger' to any woman with the perception to see through his suave good looks. His maroon and gold body shirt was the slightest bit

too dandified, his gold-embroidered bootpants a shade too flashy. "You always were sick, Alterman. What do you want?"

"Revenge, Leia. And one way or another I'll get it." A red light flashed as someone in the penthouse lounge summoned the elevator. "But somewhere less conspicuous, I think." The Marrethian grabbed Leia's arm tightly and hustled her out of the building.

Leia waited until they were outside, where she'd have more room to maneuver. Then she broke out of Alterman's hold and, in the same motion, spun around to kick. He anticipated her move and fell away before her, catching the heel of her foot so that she was flipped onto the ground.

They scrambled up and paired off, facing each other, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Leia tried not to let her fear show.

She knew a few basic maneuvers--both her fiance and her brother had seen to that--but they were all defensive, and something told her it'd take more than that to get out of this situation. Alterman cared for only three things--money, power, and his own self. That last included his being a skilled amateur sportsman. He was an accomplished, dirty in-fighter--and Leia doubted if she could take him out; but if she could just keep him here until the elevator came down again. . .

The same thought must have suddenly struck Alterman. He lunged, and she side-stepped. She tried a knife-edge blow, but he blocked and used his longer reach to advantage by grabbing her in a pressure-point hold, twisting her arm to the breaking point behind her, and force-marching her on tip-toe to a back-alley completely surrounded by blankly windowed sky-highs. She was on her own. None of the buildings were occupied this time

of night, and the slide-walk overhead was too far away for any straggling pedestrians to hear her screams. She couldn't even hope for a police patrol. That would result in more trouble than she had now.

Alterman loosened his grip on her, and she broke away, reflecting ruefully that she'd never be able to explain the bruises his manhandling would leave. *Right, Organa. And just who's going to see them that they'll need explaining?* She forced her mind back to the present.

"Revenge, Pers? Just because I refused your. . . 'invitation' to dinner?"

"Oh, you're good, Leia. You're damn good. If I didn't know it had to be you who betrayed me to Vader, I'd almost believe you."

Her mouth dropped in honest surprise. She shook her head. "I don't think I heard you. You think I--"

"Don't come over Little Miss Innocent with me, Leia. I know damn well you stole a portfolio of documents from my study the night I had you brought for dinner. One of the servo-droids saw you there. You said you'd make me pay, and you have. If Vader hadn't gotten his hands on those papers I'd still be in the Senate, and you and he could go--"

Leia bit her lips closed over startled laughter and turned her head away lest her sudden amusement be reflected on her face. She was at Alterman's mercy, not as a rebel and a traitor, but as one of Darth Vader's agents. Only Vader would appreciate the irony of her situation. Vader, and maybe--

"--and I think he'll pay good money to get you back."

Leia's amusement died. Alterman was right. Vader would pay very highly to get her back. And while she might have resisted his mind probe once, she had no confidence in her continued ability to do so.

She had to stay out of Vader's hands. At least until after Han and Luke pulled off their plan. The Alliance couldn't die because of an insignificant skulda such as Pers Alterman.

"Perhaps." She schooled her expression, careful to keep all desperation off her face and out of her voice. Let Alterman think her bored, blase. "But don't you think my father might pay even more?" And pray Morga the news of Alderaan's destruction had not yet hit the general newstapes and vid-shows, and that Alterman did not share Jasne's sources. With the destruction of the Death Star so quickly following Alderaan's demise, Leia somehow thought the Empire would take its time releasing--

It looked as though her gamble might pay off. Alterman's eyes narrowed thoughtfully and he sized her up again. "Now that, my dear Leia, is an idea. Particularly if I ensure Bail's co-operation by making you my wife. With all the wealth the Organas control--" His voice trailed off. "But then, I'd never get you to an altar undrugged, Leia. And blood tests would reveal the drugs immediately." His voice sounded genuinely regretful. "I'd have enjoyed the schooling of you."

He shook his head. "No, my Leia. There's one thing Lord Vader can do for me that's outside your father's scope, in spite of his wealth. Reinstatement, Leia. That's my selling price. My senatorial seat back, and full exoneration. I think, since it was you who cost me the seat in the first place, that that's only fair, don't you?"

He closed on her again, grabbed both arms. "But I don't think Vader will mind if the merchandise is returned to him somewhat the less for wear. You owe me, Leia. And you're going to pay."

"You're talking like a cheap novel," Leia said. "And I hate anything cheap." She pulled back. As he tensed against her weight, she changed direction to take advantage of his strength, knocking him

backward. At the same time, she brought her hands up and out to break free of his hold. She spun, only to be tackled from behind.

They rolled on the ground, a tangle of arms and legs. Alterman's size and weight proved the advantage here, and he pinned her down so she could barely move. His longer legs immobilized her own quite effectively. Her left arm was twisted painfully beneath her body, her right he clamed to the ground. She tried to arch her back, to force his mass to work against him so he would slide over her head, but she couldn't get any leverage. Tears of rage filled her eyes.

Alterman grinned. "Oh, yes, Leia. You will pay." He twisted his free hand in the neckline of her blouse and yanked. The fabric tore and he pushed it aside with an impatient curse. His fingers kneaded her bare flesh painfully, and he kissed her so brutally that she tasted the metallic bitterness of her own blood.

His hand moved down her body, questing. He fumbled at the waist of her skirt. Desperation made Leia frantic. Alterman's mouth was still imprisoning hers, making it difficult for her to breathe. Automatically her mouth opened to take a gasping swallow of air. His tongue was there immediately, invading her, making her feel ill, contaminated. She bit down, hard. Blood spurted into her mouth, almost choking her.

"Why you little--" Alterman's voice was distorted. He reared back, drew her up. He slapped her face full-force several times, then smashed her head into the ground. Leia was stunned, but managed to spit out the piece of his tongue she had bitten off. Alterman wiped his face of blood and spittle. "The Organas are too good for me? I'll rut you in the street like a portside whore, Leia, and take you naked to your master." He ripped the blouse from her body, tossed the pieces aside.

Leia's arms were finally free. She

clawed his face, pulled out clumps of his hair. She levered herself up, drove her head into his chin. He loosened his hold on her and she twisted out from under him, crawled clear.

As he climbed to his feet he pulled a knife from a hidden sheath on his boot, activating the vibroblade, and it hummed into life. He glared at her, motioned her to her feet. "You little bitch, I'll slice you thirteen ways to--"

"Vader will kill you--and not pleasantly--if you Tay one more finger on me."

"They'll have to find the remains, Leia. And you'll be scattered over half a hemisphere." He lisped horribly as he tried to get his wounded tongue around the threatening sentences. With a sinking feeling, Leia realized that Alterman had turned from rapist to sadistic killer--and that he'd not be interested in giving her a quick, clean death. She had hurt him. She must die, and die messily. Not even the thought of wealth or reinstatement would deter him.

Leia had nothing left to lose. She backed off, as though retreating, then took a running leap forward. Alterman pulled aside at the last minute, but she was able to get in a glancing blow that knocked him off balance. He tripped, fell to the ground. The knife skittered out of his hand and across the alley. Leia fell into a crouch. She hesitated a moment. *Always make sure your opponent can't get up again*, both of her teachers had drummed into her head.

Unfortunately, Alterman was already stirring. If she grappled with him now, she'd quite possibly be the loser. Leia made up her mind. She let Alterman lay and dashed to the knife. She grabbed it, activated it again, and spun to face her assailant. He was shaking his head to clear it. He looked around, spotted her. Holding the knife defensively before her, Leia motioned him to his feet.

She bit her lips over her frustration. Just what the hell did she do now? She couldn't let him go. If he hated her before, he'd hate her even more now that she'd bested him. And there was too much at stake for her to constantly be looking over her shoulder to see if he were ready to pounce. She had no place to keep him prisoner, but somehow the thought of killing him out of hand-- She grinned mirthlessly. If she really were one of Vader's agents, it'd be so simply. Take him to Vader. She toyed with the idea for a moment, attracted by the ironic beauty of it, but reluctantly decided it was too dangerous--even for her warped sense of humor.

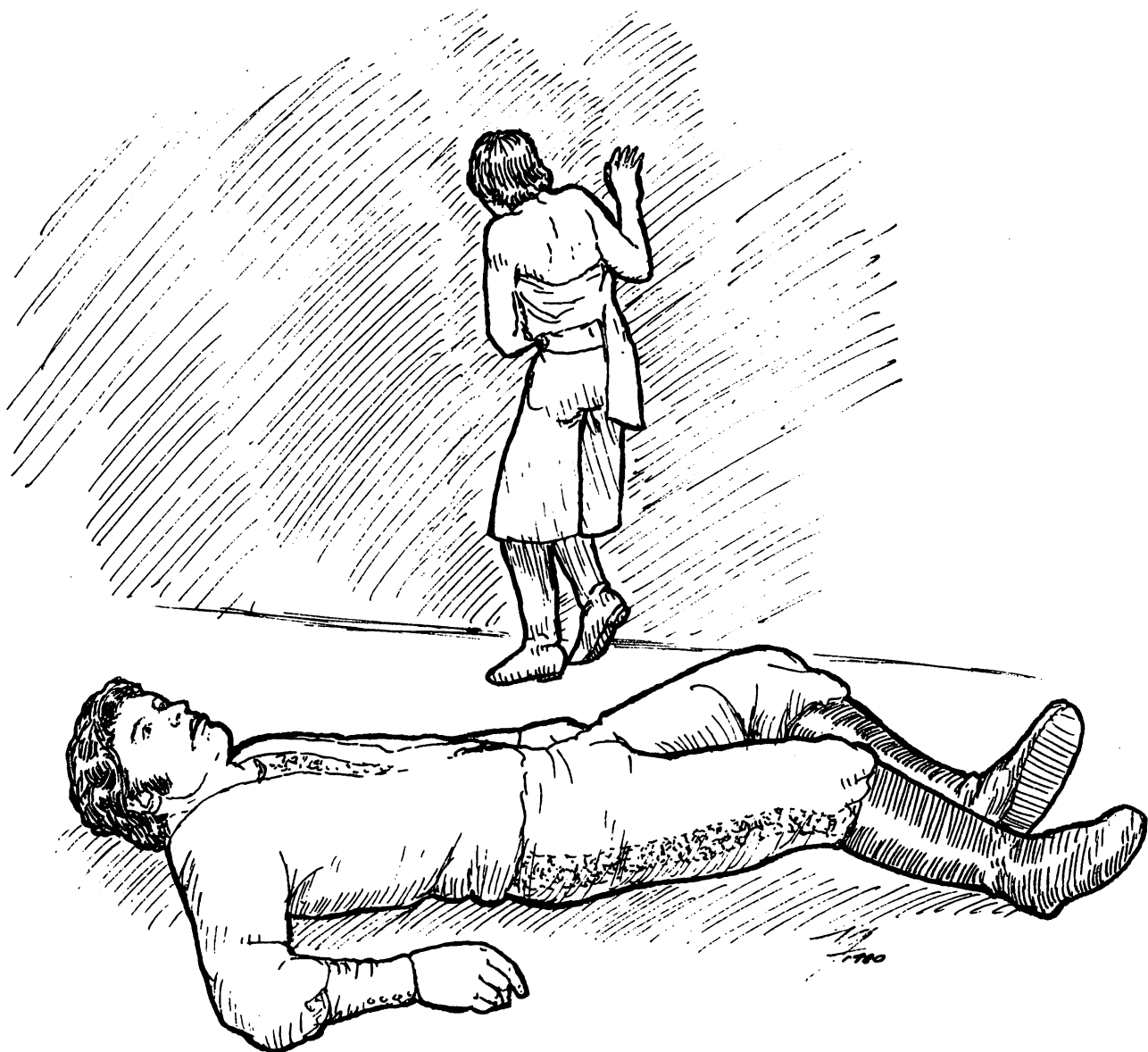
Alterman shifted position slightly and Leia eyed him warily. He'd not give up this easily. And surely he was armed with more than this knife. What--

He dove for the ground. Even as he fell, he twisted to pull his blaster from a hidden shoulder holster. He snapped off a quick shot. It flared dangerously near her, singeing her right shoulder, then burned itself out harmlessly on the wall behind her. He aimed again.

Leia flicked the knife into throwing position and hurled it at Alterman even as she threw herself to one side. She'd not forgotten her lover's lessons, drummed into her so long ago. She hit Alterman directly on target, even though he and she both had been moving. He stiffened, a look of astonishment on his face, then crumpled slowly to the ground.

Leia pulled away from the smooth wall against which she'd fallen. She staggered over to Alterman, looked down on him. The look of astonishment was still on his face.

She bent, pulled the knife from his gut. She deactivated it, looked at it numbly. Vaguely feeling that it could somehow be linked to her, she tucked it into the waistband of her skirt.



She picked up the remnants of her blouse and started to walk away. The enormity of her action hit her all at once. *I've killed someone. Someone I know.* This wasn't a nameless, vat-born clone trooper. This was Pers Alterman. What did it matter if he were trying to kill her? She'd killed him. And not just by sending a faceless young warrior out to die nobly in battle, or by defying Tarkin and--but no, better not explore those fears too closely. The nightmares would return, and this time there'd be no strong arms to hold them off. . .

She was suddenly, violently ill. It was more than fifteen minutes before she could wipe her mouth and wrap the ruined pieces of her blouse about herself.

She walked away, leaving the body where it lay.

INTERLUDE:

The Lord Darth Vader looked down in silence at the holocube playback he'd made for himself from the vital Death Star tape. Almost idly, he wondered how many officers in the intelligence corps had seen the readouts from the Death Star monitor-cameras. Too many, he knew, to hope that the information this particular cube held could be preserved for his eyes only.

The cube flickered, went on automatic replay yet again. The scene had played itself out so many times it had lost clarity. In the dimness, Vader watched as a stormtrooper burst into a small, bare room, the cell aboard the Death Star once occupied by the rebel princess Leia Organa. The princess, awakened from her slumber, sat up and looked at the trooper. In response to her comment, the trooper yanked off his helmet. Blond hair gleamed in the cell's dull light. "I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you."

Vader waited patiently for the scene to play itself out. The trooper--the youth--turned to flee from the cell, closely followed by Leia Organa. The Dark Lord reached out a gloved hand and froze the action on the holocube.

*So like. I'd know him anywhere.
Damn you for this, Kenobi.*

Vader clenched his hands and the cube collapsed within itself in a smoking heap. Somehow, he had to find Luke Skywalker. Find him, and keep the Emperor's attention away from him.

Somehow. And yet. . . the boy was already strong in the Force, even though untrained. He would create a disturbance in the Force. How. . . ?

Damn you, Kenobi. Damn you.

Second Movement

"Jasne, I still don't see wha--oo--oof!" Luke's question stopped abruptly as Jasne grabbed him by the front of his jacket and slammed him against the rough-finished durastone wall. In a low, coldly furious voice, she asked, "Did you, or did you not, agree to do as you were told?"

Luke swallowed, nodded.

"And before we even entered this alley, did I, or did I not, say to maintain absolute silence until I said otherwise?"

He nodded again.

Jasne released him, smiling grimly as his hand crept to his throat. "I hate repeating myself, but in this case I'll make an exception. I'm in command here. If I say 'jump', you jump, even if you don't see the slightest need for it. Your next mistake could kill us both, so



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if you don't want to take orders, say so. I'll take a forfeiture cut, return the balance of the payment to Sinah, and say farewell."

Luke blanched, and Jasne knew he was wondering how to tell his princess he'd blown the mission before it even got started. "I'll be careful, Jasne. I promise. It's just that--"

"Listen, child," said Jasne, not unkindly, "your friend JoDar, as you may have gathered, is not one of my favorite people. However, he does occasionally know what he's talking about. If he said not to risk that last ship, there's a reason." She shook her head. "Maybe it's a bad model, not worth the risk, or he knows the owner, or it's simply too well known--the Emperor's nephew's runabout or some such."

Luke shifted his feet. His face mirrored vague regrets for the dashing, candy-red space yacht he'd taken such a fancy to.

"No," said Jasne flatly.

Luke nodded, looking slightly embarrassed. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I just wish he'd treat me like an adult and tell me these things."

Jasne's smile was tinged with malice. "He is treating you like an adult. He's letting you chance getting yourself killed. Now let's go." She glanced at her chronometer; 2600 hours. There'd be a full work crew in their target office in eleven hours. They'd need the intervening time to foil Imperial security measures and choose the right IDs and tapes. "If you're ready!" She gestured toward the building they'd been heading for before Luke's blunder.

Luke fell in behind her as she led the way to the rear delivery door of the spaceport administration complex. Although it was dark, and the alleyway deserted, they kept to the protection of walls, sliding from shadow to shadow. There was no need to invite attention

from a low-flying spycraft or a random patrol.

They were about fourteen meters from the door when Jasne halted. Obedient to her signal, Luke stopped also. Jasne casually plucked an electronic scrambler from her wide belt and aimed it at the spyeye adhering to the wall just ahead of them. She edged beneath the surveillance device, watching with a certain amount of amusement as Luke followed her lead with supreme care. Once they were past the spyeye's focal area, she grinned at Luke and deactivated the scrambler. There was no reason to risk having a tech crew sent to repair a 'malfunctioning' spyeye. Done her way, the brief spurt of interference was probably written off as static, or as a temporary problem that had spontaneously corrected itself.

Jasne hooked the scrambler back to her belt, and pulled a key from her pocket. Now that they were at the delivery door, the real fun and games were about to begin. Jasne smiled as she thoughtfully hefted the small metal artifact in her gloved hand, the familiar exhilarating surge of adrenalin washing through her as she contemplated the door. General security measures called for lock cylinders to be changed on an irregular basis. The key in her hand should be good for at least another month--

--always assuming that those Imperial idiots haven't finally had the brains to change the locks at random intervals, instead of irregular intervals. Jasne glanced at Luke, tautly earnest at her side. *Heigh-ho, here goes nothing.*

Several seconds went by. Jasne swore mentally. *Damn it, why isn't that door opening? Silent alarms? Damn.* But she'd committed herself the instant she'd set key to lock. She couldn't walk away leaving the key in the lock, it might be traced to her, however unlikely that might seem. And she couldn't take the key out and go--breaking the circuit too soon would also trigger the alarm system. *I don't fancy just standing here*

and waiting for the guard to join the party, either-- There was a click. The door slid open.

Jasne motioned Luke in, followed herself a second later. She removed the key and the door automatically closed and locked behind them.

It was completely dark inside the building. Jasne put on her night-lenses and glanced around to get her bearings. Luke, on her right, had followed instructions and put on his night-lenses as soon as they entered.

Their goal was the suite of offices at the far end of a maze of corridors. Two doors stood between them and that goal. Jasne led the way to the first door; there she stopped, holding up a cautionary hand to Luke. According to the security report she'd paid such good money for, a simple circuit jumper should do the trick here.

Moving with the ease and grace of the expert in any field, she pulled out a miniature jumper, one of the most efficient models on the market. Separating it into its two components, she placed one half on the door jamb and the other half over the lock tumblers. Now for the interesting part. She took out one of her skeleton keys. There was always the chance that some special electronic refinement had been added that would--

She turned the key, the door opened, and they were still alive, in one piece, and alone. She smiled at Luke and motioned him on. The circuit breaker she had to leave in place, to be removed when they left. It was a risk, of course, but there was no way to remove the anti-security device with the door open--not without setting off the alarm. *Oh, well, this whole job's absurd anyway. What's one more life-and-death risk among friends?* At that, she grinned wryly.

The corridor they now travelled was as dark as the one they'd just left, and had tighter security measures. Twice Jasne dealt with spyeyes, being careful

not to use the same tactic she'd used in the alleyway. All security men were paranoid--and no self-respecting paranoid would fail to see the pattern of a steadily progressing wave of malfunctioning spyeyes headed straight for the administration offices.

With a thin extendible rod, Jasne attached a special transmitter to each spyeye. Both transmitters were programmed with a continuous loop of film showing an empty corridor. An army could march past each spyeye now and not register. *I do hope there aren't going to be any surprise unscheduled troop maneuvers tonight. That's all I'd need--some over-zealous guard spotting that circuit-breaker, or the monitor board not showing a squad of troopers that it should.*

Jasne flicked a sidelong glance at Luke. It was impossible to see his eyes behind his night-lenses, but his body was tense with seeming excitement. He was alert and walked quietly, with the easy grace of a trained tracker. His hand hung next to his blaster in loose readiness position. Good. In spite of his earlier mistakes, he was working out well.

They reached the second door, the one protested by four internal alarms. Jasne measured off four points at the outer corners, attached nullifiers, and reached for the doorhandle.

Before she could touch the door, Luke grabbed her wrist, held it tightly. No. Startled, she twisted in his hold, but couldn't break his grip. She glared at him through narrowed eyes, furious at him for endangering them both by breaking silence, and for laying hands on her.

With almost negligent strength, he put her behind him and walked to the door. He removed his night-lenses and attached them to his belt, then cocked his head in a listening position, seemingly completely unaware of her. Then he touched the four nullifiers she'd attached, stood motionless for a second. He ran his

hands along the door, almost as though he were looking for something. He stopped, nodded, then turned back to Jasne. Silently, he pointed to a spot almost in the center of the door, just about equidistant from the four nullifiers. His face seemed older, somehow, more mature. His eyes held a faint elsewhere or elsewhen expression.

With an effort, Jasne controlled her sheer fury. What the devil did he--damn! She couldn't even ask him what--unless . . . a fifth alarm? But how would he--that was ridiculous! Her security report on the building clearly indicated but four alarms at this point. How could this hick farmboy, who'd never been off his home planet in his life, know--crazy, that's what he was! She'd really take it out of that bastard Solo's hide for this one! She reached for the door again.

Luke's hand once more imprisoned her wrist, this time almost cutting off the circulation. *I said no.* Jasne wondered if she were hearing things. The voice was older, more seasoned than Luke's, and sounded strangely flat, almost like a voice inside her head. She stopped, unwilling to follow that line of thought.

Unwilling to risk a potentially noisy struggle with Luke, she remained still as he reached into her pouch and took out a nullifier. He attached it to the door with the same care Jasne'd taken. He nodded in satisfaction and opened the door.

He entered the suite of offices, pulling Jasne behind him. As soon as the door closed, Jasne extricated herself from his grip with a vicious twist. She managed to control her seething rage long enough to yank a white-sound transmitter from her pouch, set it at the proper frequency to nullify human voices, and turn it on. She set the device very carefully on a desk and took a deep breath. Then she turned on Luke.

"Just what the hell did you mean by

that display outside? Give me one good reason, one, not to scrap this mission now." Jasne's voice was icy, as always when she was in a really killing fury. "Come on, a reason, or I leave and you try to walk back out of here yourself. I warned you, damn it! The sensors focused on this building pick up whispers at 2000 meters! And you start talking? What--"

Luke shook his head. "Jasne, I didn't say a word. I--" He paused, looked slightly confused. "I don't know what happened out there, but I sensed great danger. I knew if you didn't attach a nullifier at that point--"

"I heard you," Jasne said flatly.

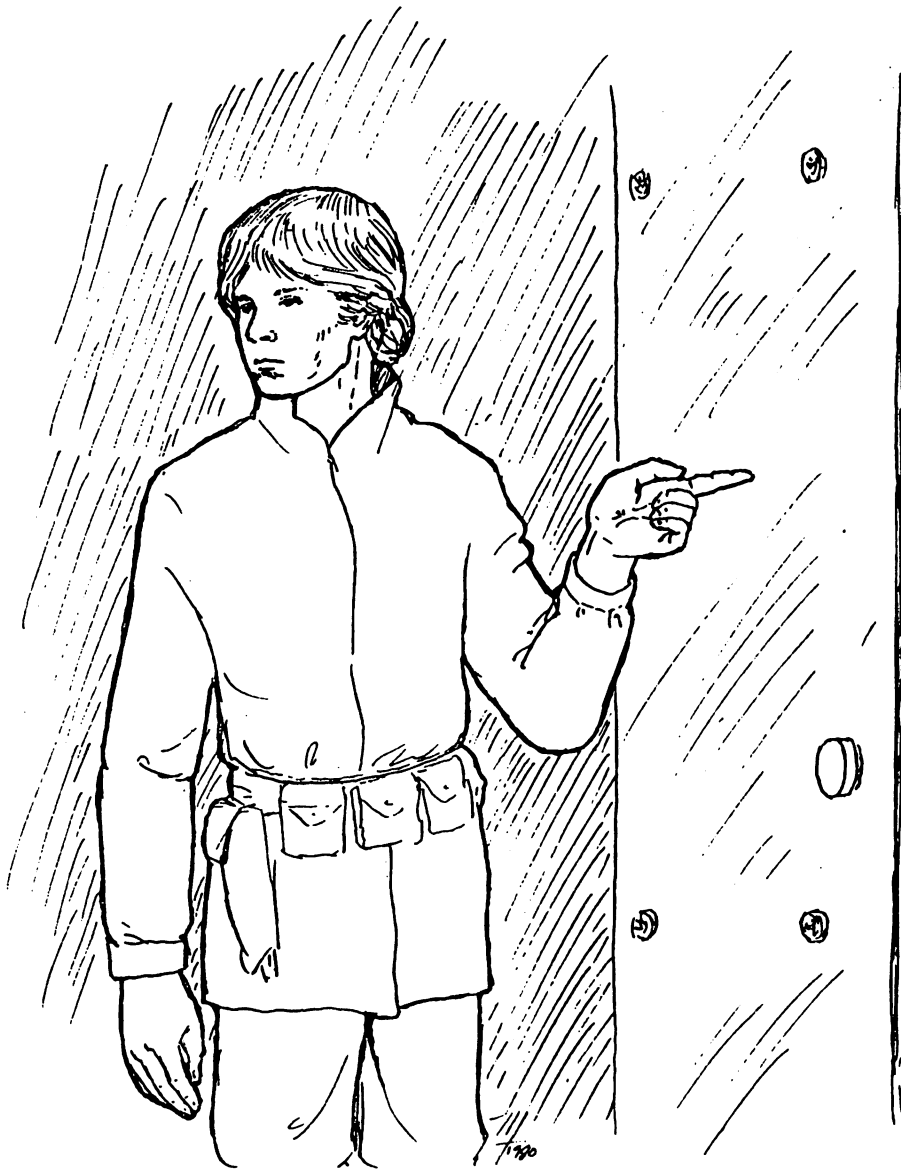
"No. I didn't say anything. But I knew--"

Jasne's hands clenched. "You knew? How? Are you telling me you had a--a 'hunch' somebody'd set a fifth alarm? You almost broke my arm for that? Not to mention opening your big mouth and--"

"But, Jasne, I--" Then he shrugged. "I know it sounds strange, but--"

"Strange? It's insane." Jasne glared at him once more. Luke looked unhappy but not guilty. *A fifth alarm? A fifth--?* She flicked on the lights and pulled off her night lenses. Then she dropped her pack on the table and brought out a rectangular, flat-finished metal box. She stalked over to the door. "All right, Larens. Do you see this?" She waved the box at him. "This is a portable X-ray device. If there is not a fifth alarm in this door, you can start figuring your own way out of here --and your excuses for your friends just in case you do actually make it." She'd been called daring, in her time but between daring and deliberate suicide was a large gulf she had no intention of crossing. And staying with Luke was beginning to look fatal.

Measuring her distances carefully, Jasne centered the portex and activated



it. Nothing. Well, that did it. She turned to Luke. "All right, that's--" Her voice faded. Luke had that strange, faraway look in his eyes again. He joined her at the door. He put his hand over hers, adjusting the portex. The pale blue outline of a nullified lock alarm showed on the readout panel of the portable scanning device.

Jasne looked into his eyes. "It is there. But--"

Yes, it's there. I knew it would be.

Jasne pulled back involuntarily, and Luke released her hand. She rubbed her wrist thoughtfully, eyeing him the while. She'd been looking straight at Luke when he'd made that last comment, and his lips had never moved. *More to him than meets the eye, that's for dead certain-- and I'll murder that joker Solo for holding something like this back. But what--oh, shit.*

"Don't tell me," she said with resignation. "Jedi?"

He gave an embarrassed shrug and a jerky half-nod. "Ben thinks--thought so."

"Ben?"

"Ben--I mean, ObiWan Kenobi," Luke responded.

"ObiWan Kenobi," Jasne said in a toneless voice. It had wanted only this. She closed her eyes. "I keep promising myself," she said. "I keep swearing that I will not get involved with religion, politics, or amateurs. Just what I needed, all three at once. Oh, Solo, I'll get you for this one."

"Yeah. General Kenobi. He--"

Jasne held up a minatory hand. "No. I don't want to hear." She might make her living flirting with death, but she'd always felt the odds were fairly well-matched--until now. "I have no intention of becoming even one word more involved with you than I already am, or I might as

well turn myself in. I'll be dead anyway."

"But--"

"No."

"Don't you care, Jasne?"

Jasne gave Luke's question all the consideration it deserved. "No, I don't."

Luke had been growing more and more distraught. Now he burst out, "Why can't I make you and Han--JoDar realized that--"

Jasne smiled sardonically and shook her head. "You'll catch cold at that one. He's even less interested in the workings of the galaxy than I, if that's possible."

"But under the New Republic--"

"Under the New Republic we'd still be criminals--and don't ever forget it."

"No, you wouldn't. You--"

"Oh? You're going to pass a law that smuggling and burglarly are crimes unless done by Jasne Makaval and JoDar Kylan--under any and all aliases that they may use? You're going to give us a license to steal, perhaps? Why not one to kill, while you're at it? It would make just about as much sense."

"Of course we won't. But you'll--"

Jasne sighed and shook her head once more. "Please. Not earnest prattle about the joys of 'reforming' and 'going honest'. It may have skipped your notice, but both your smuggling friend and I enjoy our work. We excell at what we do. If we wanted to lead humdrum, mundane lives, we would." Even the thought made her feel acutely uncomfortable. "Unfortunately for honesty, I despise being bored."

Luke shifted uncomfortably, and Jasne could see he was still not convinced she and Han weren't ripe for conversion to

what she considered the dubious respectability of revolution. She checked her chronometer. "I am also becoming exceedingly tired of this entire subject. If you expect that rebellion of yours to even get off the ground, try giving it a little practical assistance. Now let's go get those code tapes."

Interlude

The door closed quietly behind her and Leia walked into the center of the darkened room. The enviro-puter, reacting to her presence, brought the lights up just sufficiently for her to see her way. She stood quietly for several minutes, hearing only the sound of her own breathing, the beating of her heart.

Reaction set in. She began to shake uncontrollably and was unable to stop. She sank to the carpeted floor, her legs no longer capable of support. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and rocked back and forth. She was cold, so very cold; her body and her mind were completely numb and without sensation.

It was the soft chiming of the wall chronometer that finally roused her. 2800 hours. The others would be returning soon. She had to get herself into shape before then--had to! She crawled over to the couch, managed to pull herself erect. She looked around blindly.

"Where--" Her voice--harsh, cracked--frightened her. She raised a trembling hand to her throat, swallowed painfully, and tried again. "Computer, where are the fresher facilities?"

A soft glow answered her. Leia stumbled to the dressing area. The room was large and furnished with sybaritic luxury, but Leia ignored her surroundings. She stripped and examined herself carefully in the mirror: bruises, a minor blaster burn, scrapes and abrasions,

blood--hers or Alterman's?--but nothing that should leave a permanent scar.

The apartment was provided with a full shower in addition to the more usual sonics. Leia turned both the hot and the cold faucets to full strength and entered the stall. She let the water beat against her body, revelling in the return of pain. She scrubbed herself raw, trying to erase all feel of Pers Alterman from her body. She opened her mouth full, let the water rush down her throat.

But not even the steady beat of the water could keep her mind from the reality of her situation. *Dead. He's dead. And I killed him.*

For the first time since Luke had destroyed the Death Star, Leia found herself wondering about those who had died with it.

Third Movement

Han straightened his shoulders and strode to the front gate of the sprawling hacienda. He was as familiar with this route as with the engine room of the *Falcon*. He stopped automatically a few scant centimeters from the force-field that protected Jabba's holding. Han stood quietly, hands at his sides, making no threatening gestures. He knew he was under surveillance from the main house, and Jabba and his lieutenants would interpret the slightest sign of fidgeting as weakness. *Let them make the first move, Solo. That way you're in attack position from the start.*

The battle of nerves dragged on for fifteen interminable minutes. During that time, Han was uneasily aware of the firepower trained on him from hidden vantage points on the grounds. He could be vaporized before he could blink an eye, if Jabba saw fit; and if the Hut

were in a particularly vicious mood, he just might decide that destroying Han Solo would give him more satisfaction than collecting any monies owed.

Han was almost ready to say his final prayers when at atonal, sexless voice greeted him. "If it isn't Han Solo under all that. . . paint and powder. And to what do we owe the pleasure?"

Han recognized the voice despite the distortions of the hidden transmitter. He groaned silently. As if Jasne's snide comments weren't enough, this was the perfect capper for a lousy day! "I got business with Jabba, Antibe. It's important."

"I dare say it is. To you. Jabba, however, could not possibly care less about your 'business'. Or your life. There's a contract out on you, Solo. Or hadn't you heard?"

"I guess you ain't heard from Greedo's next of kin, sister. Of course I know there's a contract out. But Jabba's a business man. He'll want to see me."

"You always were full of yourself, Solo. And any business you do tonight you do with me."

"With you? But wh--"

"Jabba's still on Tatooine, trying to straighten out the mess you left behind. I don't know, Solo. For someone who should have been lying low, you surely managed to get involved in some heavy operations. Do you know that there's an all-planets-bulletin on the *Falcon*? And that it went out over Vader's signature?"

Han pursed his lips and whistled soundlessly. "I figured on the APB after I blasted out of Mos Eisley. That's why I changed the markings on the *Falcon* and dug out a new set of papers. But Vader?"

A malicious undercurrent was evident in Antibe's voice even through the

tonal distortion. "You seem to have stepped on some rather important toes, Solo. And if you don't want to be thrown to Vader's mercy, I'd advise you to be a bit more--shall we say, conciliatory?"

Han threw a disgusted look in the direction he knew the hidden spyeye to be. "That's a bit tough when I'm out here and you're in there."

"A point. Most definitely a point." Three space-bos appeared out of nowhere. "You know the routine, Solo. Get rid of all weapons and report immediately to the first checkpoint. Then meet me in the main office."

Han flung a salute to the air. "Yes, sir, captain, sir."

"Solo, if you want to live long enough to worry about Vader, be very, very careful. Remember, as far as your --'honor guard' is concerned, you're deliberately keeping them from earning a nice, fat, finder's fee."

Han studied the three space-bos. They were the usual space-scum that Jabba kept on hand for such business arrangements as kidnappings, assassinations, and guard duty. In the seven years that he'd been involved with the Hut, he'd seen them come and go, and only a few--such as the late, unlamented Greedo--had even the minimal intelligence needed to avoid the painful death of a joy-juice addict. This crop looked to be no better than the rest. And as Antibe had indicated, that meant they were just bright enough to realize that, unless he gave them more than sufficient cause, they were not going to collect the reward posted for his head.

Han looked from the hulking Losian to the reptilian Gnossian, to the spindly Servite. Three very beady pairs of eyes were trained on him, and--unless he missed his guess--four very twitchy pairs of arms were hanging very close to weapons--hidden and otherwise.

Han raised his hands and tried his

most engaging smile. "Hey. No trouble. I'll go nice and easy."

"What a pity," Antibe drawled.

"Carmif!" the Losian behemoth grunted in agreement. Han wondered, and not for the first time, if Jabba kept a cloning vat for the breed. Every time he'd had occasion to come to the crime czar's headquarters, he'd been met by another Losian. Each looked exactly the same, and yet each had an undefineable air of difference.

"Haven't we--"

The Losian growled and shook a huge fist in Han's face threateningly.

The Servite captured his ungainly comrade's attention. "We not worry have to about one this. Antibe kill it will and reward give us will she."

Han flicked a glance at the avian. What did the featherless flyer know that he didn't? Had his luck run out with Jabba? He let his grin widen, tried to appear completely unconcerned. "If Antibe don't get to see me, you won't be getting much of anything--except trouble."

"For once, Solo, you're right," Antibe's voice sounded. "Don't you gentlemen have an appointment to keep?" She didn't raise her pitch, but Han was glad he wasn't one of the guards.

The servite used his lower pair of hands to search Han, and kept the upper pair near his weapons. He handed the Gnossian Han's blaster and vibro-blade. The reptile looked from them to Han. The Corellian was unable to discern any expression on the reptilian's face, but with almost casual ease the other crushed both weapons into useless lumps of metal.

"Ah, shit! D'ja haveta go and do that? That stuff ain't cheap, ya know."

"You haf heard the little bird-man, Ssolo. You will not be needing thesse vhen Antibe iss t'rough vif you," the

Gnossian said.

"Yeah, well, don't count your reward before it's couped and all that rot," Han muttered under his breath.

The Gnossian ignored his comment. She jerked her head toward the main house and the party set out. The Servite led point and Han followed, flanked on either side by the Gnossian and the Losian. Although it was well on to midnight, Jabba's sprawling hacienda grounds were lit as brightly as though it were day. Han knew it was not in his honor. The Hut did not like the dark. And what the Hut did not like, the Hut did not get. And vice-versa--as Han knew only too well from past experience.

Han was bundled into the antechamber of the hacienda. The Losian pushed him onto the grid of the weapons detector and nodded to the equipment operator. The equipment surged to brief life. The human operator seemed annoyed that Han had no hidden weapons, but signed him through as 'cleared'. Han was led to an underground, centrally located office by way of kilometers of winding hallways. Even after seven years, Han never failed to be amazed at the ostentatious display of wealth and power Jabba insisted on in his headquarters. Such a waste of land and resources--and in the middle of the most expensive real-property area in the Empire!--was a crime.

The Servite knocked on a door and Antibe's voice bid them enter. Still in formation, they did so. Antibe was standing next to a starmap, her back to them. Han groaned when he saw her. Antibe, who usually wandered the halls of the hacienda in a transparent joi robe of spider-silk, was fully clothed in a gold-green lurex bodysuit with matching long overvest and thigh-high boots. The more clothes Antibe wore, the madder she was. She must be fuming tonight. And Han knew he could not deal with Antibe in a foul mood--hell, he had a bad enough time dealing with her in a good mood. Or what passed for a good

were in a particularly vicious mood, he just might decide that destroying Han Solo would give him more satisfaction than collecting any monies owed.

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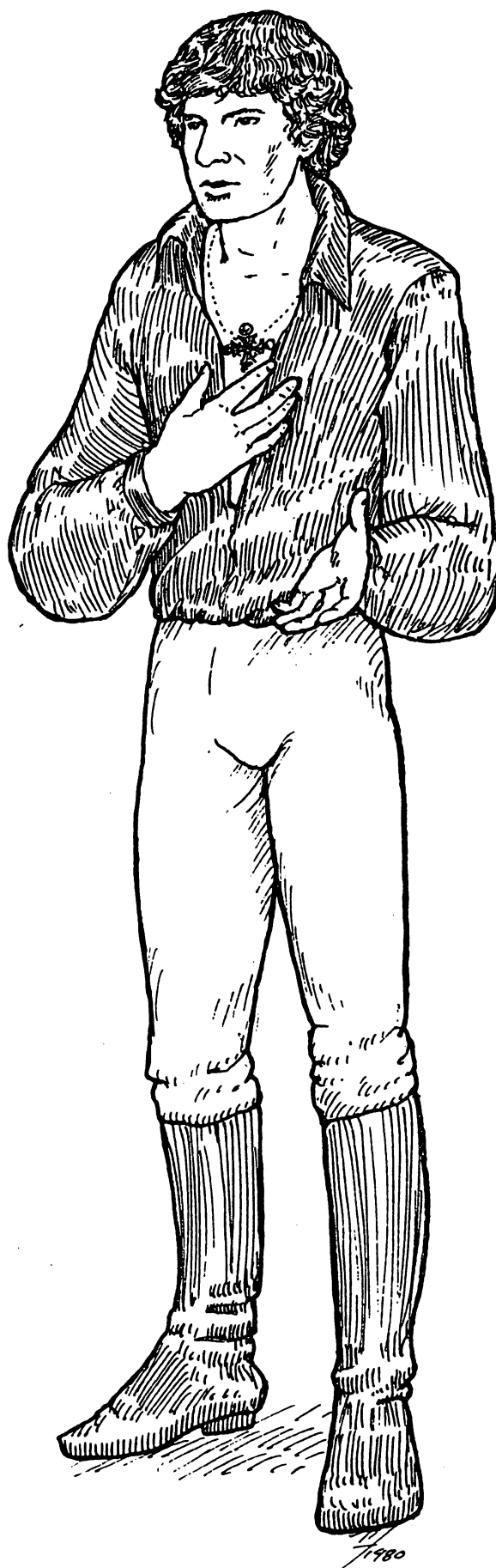
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"Yeah, well, don't count your reward before it's couped and all that rot," Han muttered under his breath.

The Gnossian ignored his comment. She jerked her head toward the main house and the party set out. The Servite led point and Han followed, flanked on either side by the Gnossian and the Losian. Although it was well on to midnight, Jabba's sprawling hacienda grounds were lit as brightly as though it were day. Han knew it was not in his honor. The Hut did not like the dark. And what the Hut did not like, the Hut did not get. And vice-versa--as Han knew only too well from past experience.

Han was bundled into the antechamber of the hacienda. The Losian pushed him onto the grid of the weapons detector and nodded to the equipment operator. The equipment surged to brief life. The human operator seemed annoyed that Han had no hidden weapons, but signed him through as 'cleared'. Han was led to an underground, centrally located office by way of kilometers of winding hallways. Even after seven years, Han never failed to be amazed at the ostentatious display of wealth and power Jabba insisted on in his headquarters. Such a waste of land and resources--and in the middle of the most expensive real-property area in the Empire!--was a crime.

The Servite knocked on a door and Antibe's voice bid them enter. Still in formation, they did so. Antibe was standing next to a starmap, her back to them. Han groaned when he saw her. Antibe, who usually wandered the halls of the hacienda in a transparent joi robe of spider-silk, was fully clothed in a gold-green lurex bodysuit with matching long overvest and thigh-high boots. The more clothes Antibe wore, the madder she was. She must be fuming tonight. And Han knew he could not deal with Antibe in a foul mood--hell, he had a bad enough time dealing with her in a good mood. Or what passed for a good



mood with that ice-bitch goddess. Damn! He'd have had a better chance of getting out of here alive dealing with Jabba, even if Greedo's nest-brother were at the Hut's ear, demanding vengeance.

Antibe turned around slowly. She was as beautiful as ever; flawless skin, a pale oval face, emerald eyes that could catch a man's soul, auburn hair that floated about her like strands of living silk. And she was as deadly as ever. The bright green eyes looked out at him with no more expression than if he were a bug impaled in a display case.

Solo, Han mused wryly, you ever get the feeling you made a big mistake being born? If I read the signs right, Antibe's gonna correct that mistake! Han's crooked smile flickered for a moment. "Hello, Antibe. It's been a while."

"Not long enough, Solo." She sized him up dispassionately. Han tried to remain cool and controlled, but Antibe's disinterested gaze, measuring and dismissing him so routinely, made it difficult.

She shook her head. "You are unquestionably the most stupid space-bo I have ever worked with." She looked him over from head to toe once more. "No matter what cover name you are using."

Han bridled. "Hold it right there, sister. Don't go comparin' me with this riff-raff." He waved his hand in the direction of his three escorts. "Just you remember one thing. You come after me. I sure didn't come cryin' to Jabba, 'Please, sir, gimme a job', now, did I?"

"Even Jabba makes mistakes, Solo."

"And I'm one?"

She inclined her head. "At least you're capable of following conversational nuances." She looked at the three space-bos, who had taken up positions near the doorway. "You may leave us. Wait outside for further instruction."

They obeyed without demur. Han was struck by how much power this slim female possessed. *More than enough to kill you out of hand, Solo, and not have to defend herself to anyone, even Jabba.*

Antibe leaned over the desk console and depressed a button that automatically locked the door after the three space-bos. Then she turned her calm gaze on Han once more. The situation needed defusing. The trouble was, Han could think of nothing that would work. With a normal female--shit, even with an irate, high-hat Leia Organa--he'd crack a smile, do a little harmless flirting, get the conversational ball back to the routine. But Antibe was not normal. She was an amoral, unfeeling, insensate, non-empathic --Han shuddered, remembering the nightmares she had laughingly given him.

Antibe's mouth twisted in a smile that was an ironic counterpoint to Han's crooked grin. "Do you admit you can do nothing in the present situation?"

Han glowered truculently. "I can always strangle you."

"I wouldn't advise it." Antibe gestured around the room. More than a dozen apertures had opened at his words, and each had sprouted heavy laser weaponry. "I doubt if you could get within two meters of me."

"Push me too hard, and we might just check that out," Han muttered under his breath.

Antibe's smile thinned out even more, but otherwise she gave no sign of hearing him. "To return to our original topic: Jabba made several big mistakes in dealing with you. His first was in hiring you at all, his second in keeping you on after the problems you caused on Kessel and on Rhiandola, his third in not posting a reward for your head a year ago."

Han looked at her in open-mouthed amazement. "For Morga's sweet sake, Antibe, what're ya try'na do? Make Jabba out as a do-gooder with the forgiving

nature of a Morgite?"

"In your case, yes. Had I been in charge of you, you would have been trained properly. Or you would have died."

"Thank the Maker for little favors, then, that Jabba's still the boss here."

Antibe smiled. "Yes. Jabba is as much in control as ever." She crossed behind the over-sized desk, made herself comfortable in the cushioned chair. It was the only chair in the room. "Which, of course, brings us down to the present. There is, I believe, the slight matter of some 35,000 credits owing this organization?"

"You're always in such a rush to conclude business," Han complained. "Don't it occur to you I might enjoy your company?"

"But of course you do, Solo. Exactly as much as I enjoy yours." She sat forward, elbows on the desk, her fingers steepled in front of her face. "Why do I get the distinct impression you're going to tell me you don't have the money? Solo, surely even you would not be that fool-hardy--or stupid? To come here empty-handed?"

"Not empty-handed, precisely."

"Ah?" Antibe sat back in her chair, rested one arm along the back. "Then suppose you tell me just how equipped you are to repay your debt--precisely."

Han shifted uneasily from foot to foot. He'd not realized how difficult it would be to explain the whereabouts of the 35,000 credits he'd had earlier. For that matter, how could he explain why he'd given his money over to that slip of an Alderaan--Mother Morga! There weren't enough words in standard to ever adequately explain Leia Organa to Antibe. Or vice versa.

He began a highly expurgated version of his recent adventures, leaving out all mention of rebels and Jedi. Cut to the bare bones, it sounded unbelievable,

even to him. An expression of patent incredulity was on Antibe's face, and the expression deepened with each additional detail.

"--and basically, that's where things are now. So, you see, I--" He paused, eyed Antibe askance. "What's the matter, you don't believe me?"

"Oh, I believe you, Solo. Not even you would dare spin such a story if it weren't true. But you must admit, the thought of you in the role of an altruistic savior is, shall we say, mind boggling?" She leaned forward, pierced Han with an intent stare. "In the seven years that I have known you, you have never done anything without considering the profit margin. What's your percentage in this deal?"

"Antibe, it ain't that kinda proposition, honest. Like I said, I hadda come here anyway to see Jabba. So when the kids needed transportation I let them hitch a ride with me. That's all it was."

"And now I am to believe that this Sinah Andell--whom I am to accept as a casual friend of yours--conned you into lending her 35,000 credits? With no collateral? Solo, you'd sell your mother for half that much. Since when have you been imbued with the spirit of knight errantry?"

"It wasn't exactly without collateral," Han explained helpfully.

"Oh?"

Han reached into his pouch and pulled out the letter of credit Leia had drawn up for Jasne. He tossed the letter across to Antibe. "Sinah'll fill this out for the right amount tomorrow and cash it. Soon's she gets the credits, she'll give 'em to me and I'll bring 'em to you."

Antibe did not even glance at the piece of parchment. She looked at Han silently for several long minutes. Her eyes were more expressionless than ever.

"Do you honestly expect me to believe you?"

Han felt Death's cold breath at his back. "Antibe, as Morga Incarnate is my witness, Sinah Andell is good for the money. And I swear, the very first chance I get tomorrow, I'll get to a bank and get the credits to you," he said desperately.

Antibe fingered the parchment letter of credit thoughtfully. She stood and walked to the computer wall, pressed a button. There was the hum of power.

"Computer on."

Han cast a sideways glance at Antibe. The computer had been programmed with her voice. Her idea? Or Jabba's?

"Engage the facsimilator."

"Engaged."

"I want a full copy of this letter of credit. I also want you to tie into the local banking circuits and give me a fax-sheet showing the status of this account, and any corollary holdings." She fed the parchment into the maws of the computer system.

Han started forward. "But that's--"

Antibe spun around. "That's what, Solo? Illegal? Aren't we the fine one to talk? Or were you going to say that that's private information? You have no privacy from me, Solo. Nor does anyone connected with you. And the sooner you realize that, the better."

The computer chimed. The original letter of credit and two slips of paper were deposited on the out tray. Antibe returned the original letter of credit to Han and pocketed the facsimile. She picked up the account status report, glanced over it. One winged brow lifted in surprise. She looked at Han. "Your --'friends' are quite able to cover the debt you owe--and then some." She cocked her head, looked at him appraisingly. "What are you doing running with this

kind of money, Solo? I never figured you for more than a mildly amusing penny-ante grifter."

"Antibe, the thing I love about you the most is your Stralm-bedamned tongue. You got such a clever line of compliments."

Antibe ignored his sarcasm, her attention once again on the paper in her hand. She studied the account status fax-sheet carefully. At last she looked up, an indecipherable expression on her face. "All right, Solo. You have your one day's grace period. But hear me, and hear me well. If I don't have forty thousand--"

"Forty thous--"

Antibe raised a warning hand, effectively silencing Han. "One more comment, Solo, and I'll attach even more interest." She paused a moment, and when Han was silent, continued. "As I was saying: if I don't have forty thousand credits in hand within the next thirty hours, you may as well slash your throat. Because somehow, someday, you will be a dead man. And one of my operatives will be very rich. Do I make myself quite, quite clear?"

Chills ran down Han's spine at the clipped, matter-of-fact tones in which she'd passed his death sentence. The lady might be lovely, but she was not for the likes of him. *Wonder if she'd like to be Lady Vader?* The thought was frightening in its simplicity. And in a match between Vader and Antibe, Han was not too sure he'd put his money on the Dark Lord. What the hell Jabba had over her that he could keep her subservient to him--

"Solo, do I make myself clear?"

The repeated question caught Han's attention. "Very clear, Antibe."

She smiled, revealing pointed little teeth. "Good. I'll see you tomorrow, then." She pressed a button on her desk.

The door opened and the same three space-bos entered the room. Antibe gestured toward Han. "Escort Captain Solo to the front gate, then report back to me for further instructions." She turned back to Han. "Until tomorrow, Solo."

Han nodded, wondering why he felt like an Imperial prisoner on Termination Alley rather than someone who'd just gotten a reprieve. "Until tomorrow, Antibe."

Interlude

It was past midnight before Leia felt reasonably clean again. She turned off the water and left the stall, padding over to the dressing area. Several dressing gowns were draped over the chaise, and one was short enough that it would not trip her. Leia wrapped herself in it and sat at the dressing table. Picking up Jasne's hair-brush, she brush-dried her hair in front of the large mirror.

The movement of the brush through her short-cropped hair was invigorating, yet soothing. She could almost forget the events of the early evening. But the pain in her shoulder, and the bitter taste that remained in her mouth, kept the memory all too real.

She paused, hair-brush still in her hand. Had they found Alterman's body yet? And if so, what theory were they working on? She dropped the brush onto the dressing table and jumped to her feet. She ran back into the living room, coming to a halt near an all-purpose plastisteel table.

"Computer, get me a current news-tape on the trideo."

There was a shimmer in the air in front of her. The holographic likeness of one of the local newscasters appeared on the table top. Leia listened intently.

The early items were routine, although under other circumstances Leia would find them of interest--reports of miner unrest on Kessel, of increased military maneuvers on the Rim, of local conflicts.

Leia was ready to breathe a sigh of relief when the newswoman said, "Also, on the local scene, the Federal Investigation Bureau is investigating the brutal murder earlier this evening of Pers Alterman, former senator from Marreth. Authorities have released little information about this crime, but it is known that they are seeking Senator Leia Organa to help them in their investigation. Alterman, who is well-known for his involvement in various youth organizations. . . ."

Leia did not hear the rest of the newscast. The lies about Alterman, which would normally have infuriated her, made no dint in her consciousness.

. . .they are seeking Senator Leia Organa to help in the investigation.
. . . Leia Organa to help in the investigation. . . . Leia Organa to help in the investigation. . . . investigation. . . . investigation. . . . investigation. . . .

The endless litany repeated itself over and over in Leia's mind. She was suddenly, numbingly cold. She dropped onto the sofa and curled into a tight ball. She wrapped her arms about her legs and sat there, staring blindly into space, hearing nothing but the endless repetition of the newscaster's voice.

Fourth Movement

Han let himself into Jasne's apartment. The lights were on low. "Sinah? You here?"

When there was no answer, he grew

worried. Leia'd have been back hours ago if all had gone well. Where was she? "Computer, lights on."

The lights came on full. In the sudden burst of brightness, Han could see Leia crouched on the sofa. She was completely huddled into herself. He crossed the floor in two swift strides and knelt by her. He pulled her close. Confident that Jasne's apartment was surveillance-free, Han allowed his JoDar persona to slip. Leia needed Han right now. "Princess, what--"

Whatever it was, Leia was still too involved in her nightmare to let him share it. The yapping of the trideo got on his nerves. "Computer, shut that damn thing off," he threw over his shoulder.

Leia shuddered at his words and came a little out of herself. She pulled away. "No. Newscast. They know--"

"Know? Know what? Who are 'they' and what do they 'know'?"

Leia was in no condition to answer, although it was obvious she was trying to gain control of herself. Han was worried. After all Leia'd been through in the past few days, why was she falling apart now? She'd mentioned a newscast. Was there a clue there?

"Computer, re-run the evening's news programs."

Han watched closely as galactic and local items were played out before his eyes. He saw nothing in the first part of the presentation for worry. Han sat on the sofa beside Leia, held her closer so that her head was cradled against his chest. "Look, love, I don't--"

--on the local scene. . . murder of Pers Alterman. . . in a surprise move, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is seeking Senator Leia Organa for questioning. . . Organa had been presumed dead when the diplomatic courier ship she was aboard, the *Viceroy*, was destroyed earlier this

week in a freak meteor shower. . . unknown at this time if there is any connection with the sudden and unexplained cessation of communication and information from Organa's home-world, Alderaan. More on--"

"Computer off!" Han tightened his hold on Leia. "That what has you so worried, kid?"

Leia nodded. She drew a shuddering breath and pulled away to look up into his face. "They know I was there. I don't know how, but they do."

"All right, Your Glory. Just settle down and tell me everything. Don't omit a thing, because the very thing you leave out may be what I have to know to figure where they're operating from."

Leia gave Han a watery smile and he cursed silently. He'd have to do something to get her dander up again, and do it soon, if she didn't snap out of this mood. Leia was a fighter, a sassy-tongued harridan who gave better than she got. It was wrong for her to be so burdened by sorrow and guilt. She didn't know how to handle such emotions.

Leia recounted the events of the early evening, adding, ". . . and my brother Chalil insisted a princess know how to defend herself, and not just depend on her guards. He taught me to use a knife, to shoot a blaster, and a couple defensive shuker-ta moves."

Han grinned. "Remind me not to go a round with you, Leia." He settled comfortably into the sofa, drew Leia back with him. *Keep it light, Solo. A repetition of last night and you might as well give up and join the damn rebellion.* "There's no way you can deny being there. You left enough evidence a blind man could see it. Fingerprints on the body and on the wall, skin samples under Alterman's fingernails, blood, sputum, vomitus. Hell, you left enough of you behind, Vader could clone you if he had a mind to."



Leia shuddered. "I--I guess I'm not much of a success as a criminal." She gave a short, derisive laugh. "Or as a revolutionary. They know I'm here, Han. They'll be looking for me, for us."

"I told you it wasn't gonna be easy, Your Worship."

"You didn't say it'd be impossible." She pulled away, looked at him accusingly.

Han relaxed. Leia was coming out of her daze. "Look, Your Glory, it ain't my fault you got a fascinating group of friends and acquaintances. Vader and Alterman're enough! You got anybody else in your past gonna cause us trouble?"

Leia bit her lip, flashed Han an upward glance.

Han was immediately on the defensive. "Uh, Your Worship, I'm glad you're feeling more the thing, but whatever you got in mind, no."

"I just thought that when this is all over you might help me get Chalil off Llangerol."

Han held Leia at arm's length; he looked down at her with the expression he might give a random-timed grenade. He shook his head, rubbed his ears. "Your gloriousness, I think the implants have affected my hearing. I could've sworn you said you wanted me to--"

"To help me get my brother off Llangerol, yes."

"Princess, Llangerol's an Imperial prison planet."

"I know that, flyboy. Why else would I need your help to get Chalil off?"

"Listen, little one. Your wits, what few you have, are wandering. You break out of prisons, not into 'em."

Leia nodded agreeably. "Right. We break into Llangerol, so we can break Chalil out."

"You do, Your Glory, not me. Sweetheart, I love ya dearly, but not enough to commit suicide."

"Han, you'll be paid."

"Yeah? How much and by whom?"

"Whatever's the--damn you, Solo. Don't you ever think about anything but money?"

Han paused consideringly. "No," he said simply.

Leia grinned, all traces of remembered horror vanishing. "I guess that's put me into my place," she said ambiguously. She sobered instantly. "Han, what do we tell the others?"

"The truth. We have to."

Leia nodded reluctantly. "I hate to tell Luke."

Han felt a sudden, irrational stab of jealousy that he quickly thrust down. "Oh? Afraid it'll blow his image of you?"

"No, I'm afraid it'll enhance his image of me as an 'avenging angel' to be hemmed in and protected."

Han nodded. "Yeah, there is that risk. But for my money, the one to hate telling is Jasne."

Leia looked at Han. Amused horror slowly dawned on her face. "Oh, gods! She'll kill us. She'll kill us and cut our bodies up into little pieces. Oh, sweet Morga, Han. You're right. After years of establishing a reputation on Dardanel that's above suspicion--"

Han laughed so hard he almost choked. "Along comes a snip of a rebel princess, a farm-hick Jedi, and a Corellian pirate who's in over his ears. And they--" Laughter rocked him again. "Gods! We'll be lucky she don't put our heads on pikes!" *And if she don't, Antibe will. Well, Solo, here's to a short life and a*

*met*ry one.

"Can't we just not tell her?"

Han gave Leia an affectionate squeeze. "Coward. Where's the woman who stood up to Tarkin and Vader?"

"On vacation. She's sensible."

Han ignored Leia's comment. "'Sides, if we don't tell her, and she gets the feedback from the press, or an investigation, she'll kill us twice as much."

"Han, you can't be twice as dead as dead."

"Yeah? Tell that to Jasne."

"Tell Jasne what?" Han and Leia looked around at the quiet words. Luke and Jasne had entered unannounced.

The smuggler and the princess exchanged guilty looks. "Well, Jasne," Han began. The princess was mumchance silent, and had scrunched down next to him, letting him take the full blast of Jasne's wrath. "It's like this. . . "

PART FOUR: Mission
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Feeling conspicuous in the Guardsman's uniform he'd dug up from the depths of his clothes locker, Han hunkered down to rest against the steel-plated wall at the rear of the warehouse. He glanced around curiously. He, Luke, and Leia'd been the first to arrive. Empty, echoing, the unused storage area was ideal for their purposes. It was lucky that one of Jasne's 'business associates' had so convenient a location

available for their use--for the right price, of course.

Han wondered briefly just what that price had been. Leia had rather pointedly excluded both him and Luke from her discussion last night with Jasne. And how she'd ever gotten the redhead calmed down--Han shook his head admiringly. He didn't know what she had done, but it had worked. Here they were, still at large, and Jasne, though resolutely refusing to attend this briefing session, was contract-bound to them until they blasted off planet.

Han stretched and rubbed his back against the wall in an effort to soothe an annoying itch between his shoulder blades. This time yesterday, he'd not have given a pirate's damn for the rebellion's chance of survival. But somehow, in spite of Vader's being in port, in spite of stepped-up security, in spite of an APB for the *Falcon* and a police dragnet for her, somehow, Leia'd smuggled three shiploads of rebels past the Star-Destroyers in drydock, and into Cinnccinnatus under the Port Authority's collective noses. If--no, when this caper was over, heads would roll. As a right-thinking smuggler, Han couldn't help but feel pleased over the future discomfiture of certain port officials.

However, Han felt a keen sympathy for the Emperor. Palpatine had better hold onto his loridon wreath with both hands. Leia Organa was after it. And from what he'd seen, what Leia Organa wanted, Leia Organa got.

Which reminded him. . . it was definitely time, after this caper was concluded, for him to take off, before Leia got the chance to be after him for some other dumb scheme. And that damn wookiee'd never let him back out from--*Llangerol? Nah. Not even Leia'd have the gall to. . . would she?* Han threw a worried glance in Leia's direction.

She was dressed once more in the drab-green flight suit she'd worn just yesterday morning, when this had all

begun, and was standing at the front of the room, greeting the rebel troops who were straggling in, obedient to the coded messages she'd been able to get off to them before they landed. Her hair was still damp from the shower she'd taken before starting out-- *though why anyone'd prefer water to honest sonics*--and curled tightly around her face. She had on no make-up and looked sixteen, but Han was convinced even her rightful age of twenty-two was too young to be involved in the madness of rebellion. *Buncha babies and old fossils running the show. No wonder things're so haphazard.*

"--teams of three, each team with a specific ship as target. We've taken the precaution of supplying you with two sets of papers. If ground personnel stops you, you will have 'authentic' crew identification." Leia smiled at Luke, sitting in the front row. "If for some reason a member of your assigned ship's crew should return and see you aboard, if they ask awkward questions, you have all been provided with ground crew papers, and a simple 'routine check-up' should lull their suspicions."

She paused, looked at the assembled rebels measuringly. "All right. Before I make final ship assignments, are there any questions?"

A tall, dark young woman leaning against the further wall raised her hand. Han frowned in concentration. She seemed vaguely familiar. Where had--of course! It was the young woman Luke had greeted so warmly. Han sat up, looked at her with more interest.

The woman wasn't a beauty, nor even particularly pretty, but even in the grey and blue battle-fatigues worn by the rebels she glowed with health and a calm, deep serenity that Han found attractive. He looked at Luke with a new respect. If this was the kid's downhome girlfriend-- *Nah. Come on. That's really stretching coincidence.* Still, Luke had mentioned that a few of his friends had jumped ship

to join the rebellion, and he'd met at least one of them on Massassi. So what could be more natural than--

"Yes, Lieutenant?" Leia nodded to the young woman.

"My lady, that plan will work quite well for the commercial transports and freighters you have lined up for us. But seven of the ships to be sky-jacked are military vessels. Even with proper IDs and protocol, there's no way those ships can lift without alerting the tower crew."

Han frowned. What did she--that by now familiar feeling was back in the pit of his stomach. He realized what she meant. "Oh, shit," he said softly.

The lieutenant smiled wryly at him, nodded. Leia's puzzled gaze darted from one to the other. "What is it, what--"

"The crews of those seven ships are stormtroopers, my lady. Clones. Single birth-vat groupings are used for tower personnel and for the crews of sector patrol vessels. It's considered more efficient. Clones from a single birth-vat have a psionic bond, and function as one. By limiting tower and ship's crew to one birthing, precious time can be saved in emergency situations. But that doesn't do us a bit of good."

Leia slumped against the wall. "Because there's no way our pilots can fool clones into believing they're vat brothers," she finished.

Luke, looking frustrated and furious, jumped to his feet and went to Leia's side. He gripped her shoulder tightly. "If I'd only had time to learn more from Ben. I could've made those clones hear only what we wanted them to hear!" Leia put her hand over his. Her expression was rueful.

"Yeah, well, that don't help us here and now, kid," Han said disgustedly as he climbed to his feet. He looked to

Leia. "You'll have to forget those seven Imperial ships, Your Worshipfulness. It's too damn dangerous. You try for them and you'll blow the whole Chaos-begotten scheme to here-and-gone and back."

"But there are only forty-six commercial or private ships in port that we can use. That's not enough to evacuate the base in one move, even adding our recalled ships. We'll be risking 20 to 30% of our people and supplies, no matter how we crowd the other ships."

"That's better'n losing all the base, the whole mothering shebang of it, out of stupid greed." Han's voice betrayed a bitterness that surprised him.

"We don't have to lose anything. Except two or three warriors," the lieutenant's calm voice interrupted.

Leia looked doubtfully at the other woman. "But you're the one who pointed out the problem, Lieutenant Darklighter."

Darklighter walked to the chair Luke had vacated and tucked her long legs neatly under her. A strand of sun-bleached brown hair had escaped from the smooth bands which wrapped around her head. Long sensitive fingers tucked the strand back into place, then quietly folden themselves in her lap. Dark, placid eyes fastened on Leia. "We can send in a SWIPE team. We can take the tower before we take the military craft, and we can plant enough charges to blow the entire field when we leave."

Han pursed his lips and whistled soundlessly. A SWIPE team. One of the special weapons infiltration, personnel expendable teams. A suicide team. But where--

"Do we have volunteers?" Leia asked.

Lieutenant Darklighter rose and walked over to Leia. She was joined by a second woman and a military-looking man, neither of whom Han had ever seen before. "You have, my lady."

Leia studied the faces of the two newcomers carefully before turning back to Darklighter. "But Chimene, why?"

The three volunteers exchanged fond glances. "We have our reasons, Your Highness," Darklighter said.

Leia nodded. "I think I understand. And I do thank you." She looked over to Han. "Will you join us, Han? This changes our plans somewhat."

Han scratched his head, then shook it doubtfully. Leia might understand what drove these crazy rebels, but he sure as hell didn't. Bunch of suicide-prone dreamers who'd try to sucker in an honest--well, fairly honest--smuggler if he didn't watch out!

"Yeah, sure, Princess," he said. "But what you think a three-man SWIPE team can do against a whole damn field--"

"That is what we're going to determine, Han." Leia turned to Luke. "Luke, you know the details of the raid. Will you please fill in the rest of the crews as to what their tasks will be?"

Luke's face mirrored disappointment at not being included in the conference with Darklighter and the others. *Not the downhome girlfriend*, Han hazarded, *else she'd never have volunteered for the SWIPE mission. But a friend nonetheless.*

"But, Leia, I--"

"Luke, please. You're the only other person who knows the full plan."

Luke grimaced, gave a half-hearted shrug. "All right, I'll do my best."

"Thank you, Luke. That's all I can ask." Leia touched Luke's cheek as she spoke and he smiled at her shyly, ducking his head into her hand in an embarrassed gesture. Leia turned to Han and the others. "Come." She led the way to the small main office at the rear of the warehouse. Once there, she faced Darklighter

once more. "All right, Chimene. What did you have in mind?"

"My lady, why be content to steal a few handfuls of ships? This is the largest military base in the sector, and will be outfitting the assault on Massassi. We've already destroyed the Death Star, thanks to Captain Solo," she nodded to the Corellian. "And Luke Skywalker. If we can strike an effective blow at Cinnicinnatus, and cripple it, we'll have the Empire on the defensive."

"Can three--"

The man who had joined Lt. Darklighter in volunteering for the SWIPE team spoke up. "Princess, the most difficult part of any SWIPE mission is getting undetected onto the target area. Thanks to the resources of our friends, we have no problem there."

Leia frowned in concentration. "Major Magi?" she asked tentatively. He nodded and she continued. "What about equipment?"

Darklighter and Magi looked to the third member of their team, a short, chunky blonde with a cheerful, guileless face. Han wondered fleetingly what her role in this madness was. Like Luke, she looked as though she'd have been more at home on a primitive, backdirt farming planet, raising crops and kids, than involved in a high-level espionage discussion.

"I'm Lt. Harfor-Lar, my lady. I was demolitions expert aboard the Imperial Star Destroyer *Holdfast* before I joined the Alliance. When I jumped ship, I was able to bring some of the more--'portable' pieces of my equipment with me." She took off her battle jacket and turned it inside out. Han whistled in appreciation. What he'd taken to be a stocky build was strategic padding. Sewn into the jacket and strapped around Harfor-Lar were some of the most advanced demolitions material on the market.

Han reached for her jacket and fingered one of the incendiary devices approvingly. "I ain't seen such a portable bomb factory since the raid on Mara--in a lo-o-o-ong time."

Leia flashed him a quizzical glance, but asked only, "Is it sufficient for their plans?"

Han weighed several of the small, palm-sized delayed-action bombs in his hands thoughtfully; he checked out the explosive power of some of the other pieces. At last he faced the princess. "It'll be close. I'd feel better if they had at least half-again as many pieces in reserve, just in case something goes wrong." His eyes slid once more to the ammunition bulging from various pockets in Harfor-Lar's jacket. "But, yes. They should be able to inflict maximum damage on the port with just this ammo--and a successful SWIPE raid."

Han held one of the bombs out to Leia. "The beauty of these pieces, Your Glory, is that they're made with a raid like this in mind. These bombs are light, easy to carry, small enough to escape visual detection, yet powerful enough to destroy an entire ship."

"A whole ship?"

"If you know where to put 'em. And anyone who served as demo expert on the *Holdfast* does."

"But how--"

"You attach 'em to the fuel tank, Your Worship. A timed flow of acid is released, eats away the tank. When the bomb hits the fuel, it makes for one mighty powerful firecracker."

"And the tower?" Leia asked, turning to the SWIPE team.

"Different objective, different tactics," Major Magi replied. "That's open. It depends on how successful we've been to that point."

Chimene Darklighter nodded. "And after our ships have cleared, we'll set off a series of main charges that will blow the tower completely."

Han looked at the three volunteers carefully. "All right. You have the explosives and the incendiaries--barely!--to do the job. If you're lucky. How you gonna make sure of that luck? I grant you can take the tower with the element of surprise in your favor. What about holding it until the last ship is cleared? There'll be an army in from the main barracks at the first sign of trouble."

"With luck, they won't even realize the tower's a target," Magi said. He hefted a few of the delayed fuse explosives. "When we came past the orbital station there were four Star-Destroyers docked there. Fuel and ammo will be ferried up to them from the port. Unless we blow the dump. If we make that the first target to go off, the Imps'll have other problems to worry about than why the tower doesn't answer."

"And if we don't have luck, the Major and I will hold them off until Chimene can dispatch all the ships," Harfor-Lar said.

Chimene smiled across at Harfor-Lar, grasped Magi's shoulder tightly. She turned to Leia. "Princess, we've all three had SWIPE training. We know the risks. We're not about to throw our lives away on foolish heroics. SWIPE forces don't go in intending to die. If we can pull off and get away, we will. But we know our objective is more important than three lives. And if it can only be bought at the cost of those lives, we are, indeed, expendable."

Leia bit her lips over any protest. She held her hands out to the three SWIPE officers. "Thank you. And good luck." She turned to Han, eyes bright. "Let's reassign their ships, Han. They have a job to do."

*

The demolitions raid was going as smoothly as clockwork. Chimene checked her chronometer. The first of Princess Organa's 'liberation forces' should be taking off soon.

"Mandracor," said a deep male voice behind her. She smiled at the use of the fairytale figure as a SWIPE recognition-word and turned to greet Mattes Magi.

He handed her a canteen. She swallowed deeply. The water was brackish, but at least it was liquid. She wiped her lips and handed the canteen back to him. He smiled and toasted her before taking a drink himself. He grimaced as he wiped his lips. "That will never replace spring water." He capped the canteen and tucked it into his back-pack. "Any problems so far?"

"None." Chimene smiled. "I've not even had to use the ground-crew ID that the princess is so proud of."

"Well, let's hope it stays this way. I don't trust raids that go this well."

Chimene's smile broadened. "They can't all be as bad as HaranJar."

"We got out of that one alive, Chimene," Mattes said wryly. He shrugged. "But you know me. It'd not be a raid if I weren't worried about something. We'll be all right." He flipped her a farewell gesture and turned.

Chimene looked after him thoughtfully. It was true that Mattes worried before each mission, but he usually forgot his misgivings as soon as he settled into his job. What was--she shook her head and started toward the last ship on her list.

There was a distant thunder and the sound of static from one of the ground transmitters. Chimene listened tensely to the tower report. "*Marcolian Marauder*,

No. CW-a952, you are cleared for take-off. Assume departure pattern 509c. This is tower patrol FM-376d, to *Marcolian Marauder*, No. CW-a952. You are cleared for take-off." Chimene glanced at her chronometer. Right on schedule. She counted the seconds off carefully. A lance of fire pierced the sky as the first of the Alliance's purloined ships took off. Chimene followed the trajectory of the converted ore-freighter as long as she could with her naked eye.

She relaxed and let out the breath she'd not even been aware of holding. No sirens, no alarms. The take-off had been accepted as a routine departure. She straightened and strode quickly to her next target.

The *Temple of Honor*, a passenger transport from Homenallah VI, sat isolated at one end of the field as befitted a ship from one of the more unpleasant theocracies in the Empire. Chimene had once been stationed on Homenallah--and had had to keep inside the compound for her entire tour of duty. The locals refused to accord rights to the female of any species. She would take a personal delight in setting a bomb on this ship.

Chimene moved toward the ship and kept a sharp lookout for any of the port's ground crew. She reached the bowl-like depression of the docking bay and spotted several burnoused figures near the loading ramp, laughing over a dice game. She swore to herself. Damn all paranoid cultures! The captain of the Homenallan ship had mounted his own guard, and there were three of them to her one. While she felt confident she could take them in a surprise attack, could she do it without drawing unwanted attention?

One of the figures turned and saw her standing on the rim of the landing bay. "You. Woman. What do you here? Begone, lest you make this are unclean by your presence."

Unclean? Her eyed narrowed and a

cold flame appeared in their depths, but she controlled herself. She glanced at the clipboard she carried as protective coloration. "Isn't this the *Reign of Light*?"

All three robed figures had turned to her. The one who had first accosted her laughed and said something to his companions, who turned back to their game. The first zealot gave her a supercilious look and said, "Stupid female, this is the *Temple of Honor*, not one of your infidel ships."

"Sorry. My mistake." She made as though to move off and the robed figure turned back to his fellows. Chimene circled the docking bay area and slid down the shallow incline to the rear of the transport. She edged under the body of the ship and attached the time-bomb to the fuel tank. *Enjoy your game, men. It should last you the rest of your lives.*

A crunch on the gravel floor of the docking area caught her attention. She risked a peek from under the ship, then drew back quickly into the shadows. A stormtrooper! Damn! Making herself as inconspicuous as possible, she looked out once more. The trooper had taken a small cassette recorder from his belt and was playing a holo-recording for the three Homenallans.

Chimene squinted, trying to bring the tiny figures into focus. She swore to herself. Princess Organa. The Princess, Luke, Han Solo, and a wookiee. They were running down metal corridors, attempting to escape a squad of troops. Where in--no time to worry now. She had a job to finish.

The trooper moved off and Chimene checked her chronometer once more. Late! She edged back and a loose stone shifted under her knee. She fell forward, banging into the under-carriage of the transport. Years of training kept her from crying out, but the noise of hitting the side of the ship attracted the attention of the Homenallans. In

another minute she'd be discovered.

Unless--a ship was due to take off from the closest docking bay in use. Could she--eyes narrowed, Chimene took out her blaster and aimed it at the three advancing fanatics. She counted off the seconds. The expected blast and earthquake came. In automatic response, the theocrats looked in the direction of the disturbance. Chimene fired under the cover of the take-off, getting in two lethal shots before the remaining guard was able to draw. Being armed did him no good. She shot him before he even located her.

Chimene crawled out from under the ship and looked at the three bodies. *The least I can do is clean up after,* she thought. She bent over the closest figure. She grabbed the slain guard's feet and dragged him up the loading ramp into the ship. She had no time to search for the perfect hiding place, so she stuffed the body into the closest open locker. Dusting her hands, she repeated the action twice.

After her third trip she gave a sigh of relief and checked her chronometer once more. She was already ten minutes late. If she did not get a move on--

"Hey down there. You. Mechanic."

Chimene bit her lips closed over a scream of fury. Damnall! After all her bragging to Mattes, was everything to suddenly go wrong? She schooled her face to a normal response and turned to meet the gaze of the black-clad security officer standing with arms akimbo, on the edge of the pit area.

"Mech, have any unauthorized personnel shown an interest in this ship while you've been here?"

"Unauthorized personnel? No, sir. I would have reported such an event to the Commandant's office immediately. Sir."

"Good. Good. Well, carry on." The hatchet-faced officer gave a vague wave in Chimene's direction and started to move off. Emboldened by the ease with which she had passed for a field-mechanic, Chimene called out to him. The officer turned and looked at her with the bored air of one who had infinitely more important things to do than to converse with a menial. "Yes?"

"Uh, sir, in the event I come across something on my rounds, what should I be looking for?"

"Rebel infiltrators."

She was startled. "But how--"

He raised a supercilious brow. "What possible concern--" His eyes narrowed. "Let me see your papers." By sheer dint of will, Chimene kept from reaching for her blaster. The security officer's hand was too close to his own weapon. She pulled out her papers and handed them up. He flicked through them.

"A supervisor I?" He eyed her in surprise, then nodded. "All right. You might as well alert your staff. We've a restructured freighter under surveillance. The markings and surface configurations are wrong, but it answers to the weight and armament specs of a ship known to run courier duty for the rebels. The outlaw Leia Organa is in Cinninnatus, and that seems the most likely ship to have brought her. Keep alert."

"Leia Organa. Yes, sir. I've seen her picture on the trideo, sir. I'll certainly keep an eye out for her. Sir."

His mouth tightened as though he suspected her mockery. "And keep an eye out for a Corellian and a wookiee, probably accompanied by a young farmboy."

"Yes, sir." *Kepp my eye out for a Corellian. Right. As though there's anything about Corellians to set them apart from a hundred other human stocks. And what does a farmboy look like?*

Wonder if he thinks their IDs are tatoored on their foreheads? Chimene gave what could pass as a mechanic's rough attempt to copy a trooper's smart salute. The officer almost saluted back, then seemed to think better of it. He waved her back to her job and marched off.

Chimene waited till he was gone, then scrambled up the slope of the docking area. As quickly as she could without attracting attention, she hurried to the supply dump.

The forged ID worked almost too easily in gaining her access. Chimene was beginning to feel the same qualms as Mattes.

Mattes and Harfor-Lar were already there, and greeted her anxiously. She quickly described what had happened, including the conversation with the security officer. "If I'd had the chance I'd have taken care of him, and of the trooper with the holo-record. But they were too visible. I couldn't risk it."

Mattes nodded. "Understood, Chimene. Our mission comes first."

They separated and moved down the rows of stock-piled armaments and supplies. With calm, well-rehearsed surety Chimene replenished some of her equipment while at the same time planting her delayed action explosives where they would do the most good. Always make the enemy supply you with as much material and equipment as possible. Rule number one for any good SWIPE raid.

She saw a couple of supply-sergeants, but they did not bother her. One engaged her in a short conversation, finally moving off with a wave. Chimene smiled wryly. Rule number two of the SWIPE raid. If you look as though you belong, few people question you.

She reached the huge, shielded area where fuel for the kilometer long Star-Destroyers was stored. Chimene reached

into her inner pocket and carefully lifted out three lengths of perimeter explosives. She ran them along the ground and set their timers. If Mattes and Hallie were as successful in planting their sections of the explosives, the shields to the fuel storage areas would go at the same time that the dump blew.

Chimene headed back down the aisle between the stock-piled supplies she made it to the main gate without incident and strode through. Briskly, as though she had every right to be where she was and was late for someplace else she had every right to be, she headed for the tower.

*

Leia turned to Han and Luke. "It's going like clock-work," she whispered excitedly. "We may pull this crazy scheme off yet."

Han, following the tower messages from the ground transmitters, nodded automatically. The blast of a departing ship sounded. He waited tensely for an alarm of some kind to sound, but the ship was away and into hyperspace while the pilot was still exchanging professional chitchat with the tower crew.

He sighed in relief, turned to the princess. "Okay, Your Worship. That's the last regular transport. We're gonna get to the military vessels pretty damn soon, so I'd suggest we adjourn the meeting to the *Falcon*."

They headed to the bay housing the disguised freighter. The field was thronged with late morning crowds, and they passed officer, technicians, independent pilots, and several die-hard hookers in gaudy finery on the way. With all the distractions, it was sheer luck that Han spied the watch set on his ship and dragged the others back out of sight of the Imperial guards.

The heavy duty transport docked next to the *Falcon* loomed out of the landing depression gouged into the poured surface of the field like a small mountain. Han, Luke, and Leia hid behind it.

Han was livid with rage. "How the HELL did they get wise to her? Her papers are in perfect order. I checked them myself!"

Leia threw him a look dripping with scorn. "You probably forgot the tax sticker, and the Revenue Service is after you."

Han glared at her. "How and why don't matter, Your Glory. What do we do about the situation?"

"I've got a very bad feeling about this," Luke said.

"I heard that line before, kid. Try to think of something more practical to say," Han said.

"I don't see you coming up with anything," Luke flashed with a trace of temper.

"We can trade insults all day," Leia pointed out, "but that's not going to get us out of this damnfool situation."

"When you're right--which is rare enough, Your Mightiness--you're right." Han pulled out a small, closed-band radio and opened communication with his ship. "Chewie, you okay in there?"

The answering roar could be heard without the transmitter. Han winced and turned down the sound. "Okay. Okay. Don't get carried away. I--" The receiver chattered again.

Leia grinned wickedly. "What does Chewbacca say?"

Han threw her a look of disgust. "You're corrupting him, Princess. He says it's all my fault, too."

Leia bit her lips over a laugh and

even Luke grinned. Turning his back on them, Han spoke appealingly into the transmitter. "Look, Chewie, you can be as insubordinate as you want once we get to space. Meanwhile, how's my baby?"

The wookiee's tone seemed calmer when he spoke again, and Han nodded several times during the narrative. He turned a bleak face to Leia and Luke when the wookiee signed off. "The ship's okay, but she's under a full thirty hour watch and the tower won't give her clearance. Chewie's been able to tap the official frequencies, and the Imps figure we'll head back here when we wanna blow the planet."

"Which we have," Leia muttered.

"Then they know we're here? And why?" Luke asked anxiously.

Han shook his head. "They know the Princess is on Dardanel and landed in the *Falcon*. They don't know for sure who's with her, but Vader's issued orders for our capture, just in case."

"But no warnings have gone out about our sky-jacked ships?" Luke persisted.

Han shook his head. "Chewie's not heard any." He shrugged. "Look, this was such a damnfool dumb idea in the first place, it'd never occur to Vader why we really came here. He probably figures the princess wanted a bolthole, or a chance to scrounge some funding for the Alliance."

"And the ship crews?"

"Now he thinks of details," Han muttered to himself. "Luke, none of those ships was due to be cargo loaded before the endweek. Why do you think Jasne brought a copy of the duty roster with her? The crews are all on leave--trusting to the well-known protection of the Cinnacinnatus Port Authority to guard their ships." As Luke still looked worried, he snapped, "And this is

a fine time to start worrying about that, kid. We got worse problems."

Leia nodded. "The important thing is that our ships get safely back to Massassi."

"We ain't giving up yet, Princess. I-- Luke? You okay?"

Luke blinked and rubbed his forehead. "I--yes, I--" He hesitated. "I was trying to use the Force, to make those guards see only what I wanted them to, but I just don't know enough. I--"

"Yeah. You mentioned doing that once before." Han shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know, maybe the old man could pull that kinda trick. But it sure don't sound like anything I'd want pulled on me." He looked at Luke seriously. "If I can't trust my senses, I might as well give up. 'Cause if I can't trust me, Luke, who can I trust?"

"You can trust the Force, Han."

"I'll leave that to you, kid. I'd rather trust me--and my blaster."

"Han, why--"

"This is scarcely the time or the place for a theophysical argument," Leia said impatiently. "How long until our people get to the tower?"

"They should be there now, and in control in about ten minutes."

"And if we get past that guard, we can take off as soon as our people control the tower?"

"Of course. Providing their timing ain't off--and the field's not automatically shut down when the supply dump goes."

"Right. And if we get caught rushing the guard, we may tip the authorities that something's in the offing."

Han nodded slowly. He distrusted Leia the most when she was being sweetly

logical.

"And even in that Guardsman's outfit you couldn't get aboard long enough to--"

He shrugged. "That'd really call attention to us. What possible interest would a Guardsman have in port matters?"

"So the main idea is to distract them enough that we can take them quietly."

Han nodded again. "That would be kinda nice," he said sarcastically.

"Han, give me two hundred credits."

"Leia, I just gave you--"

"That was last night, and for business. This is not, and to save our skins."

"That ain't enough to bribe 'em. Not with Vader in port," Han cautioned.

Leia threw him a scornful look. "Give me credit for some brains, fly-boy."

"I do, princess, I do. That's why I'm worried." Han reached into his belt pouch and counted out two hundred credits.

Leia grinned and headed back toward the gate. Luke looked after her with a worried expression on his face, but said nothing until she was out of sight. Then he hemmed and hawed until he finally blurted out, "Will she be all right? She's the one they're really after."

"Kid, I'm not about to try and stop her when she's off on one of her damn-fool crazy ideas. She'd have me tried for rank insubordination--and I ain't even in the ranks!"

Luke smiled shyly, admitting that there was little likelihood he could have stopped her, either. He shook his



head and described some of the 'almost-scenes' he and Leia'd been involved in the day before. "And then she--she--" After about ten minutes, he spluttered to a halt and shook his head hopelessly. "She just doesn't take care. And I couldn't do a thing to stop her."

Han grinned at his friend's embarrassment--and at the differing interpretations he could place on Luke's story and on Leia's. He gripped Luke's shoulder. "Look, kid, you heard Jasne. Unless Leia runs into somebody who knows her--" he deliberately pushed the thought of Pers Alterman to the back of his mind. "--any of the guards who see her'll take her at face value. A scruffy little--" A movement off to the side caught Han's attention and he turned his head. His eyes widened in amazement and he lost track of his sentence.

"Han? What is it, Han? Trouble?" Luke glanced in the direction Han was staring but seemed to see nothing unusual.

Han shook his head and woke from his daze. "That damn female," he said admiringly.

"Han? What--"

Han grinned and pointed toward the *Falcon*. "Little Leia got tired of waiting for us to solve the problem." So her *Royalness swiped my last credit and marched right to the nearest hooker and--* He had to admit the woman thought fast in a crisis.

Luke followed the direction of Han's finger. He swallowed heavily. "That's Leia?" he said in stunned disbelief. His mouth dropped open.

Han nodded gleefully. "And if Her Mightiness thinks I'm gonna let her forget this, she's got more'n one think coming."

Leia looked fantastic, Han noted. She also looked the veriest portside slut. Her short curls had been dusted with gold and amethyst glitter, her face

make-up was gold and lavender and garish, she wore an abbreviated gold halter top, her skirt was layer after layer of vari-sized lame triangles strung by the apexes to a gold mesh belt, and her gold sandals laced up her very exposed, very shapely legs.

Luke's mouth was still open. Han reached across to gently close it. "She has the situation well in hand," he said. "Shall we take advantage of it?"

Luke's eyes opened wide as Leia gave a provocative wriggle. Han noted appreciatively that Leia wore very little under her outfit.

"But they--they're clones," Luke said in protest.

Han nodded. "And trust a woman to remember the one thing men always tend to forget. They are not machines, Luke. They'll be reacting to Her Glory as much as you are, hotshot." And you, *flyboy*.

"But--"

"Later, Luke--Her Glory's got their attention. Let's not throw the opportunity away."

Han and Luke circled around behind the *Falcon*, coming up on the blind side of the two guards. Han grinned as he heard the conversation between Leia and the stormtroopers. She drove a hard bargain, did the Princess Organa.

Two well-placed blows to the head and the guards were out. Han, Luke, and Leia scurried into the *Falcon*. Chewbacca greeted them enthusiastically, pounding Han and Luke on the back and hugging Leia bone-crushingly.

"Later, Chewie, later," Han said. "Let's see if we can get this crate moving, first." He ran to the cockpit, closely followed by the others. The ship-to-shore radio was on and was adjusted to the tower frequency. A

transmission was coming through.

"Tower, this is Armed Troop Ship XVT5234-o, requesting tower clearance."

"That's one of ours," Leia whispered.

Han shushed her, waiting anxiously for the response that would tell if the SWIPE team had been successful in taking the tower.

*

At the control tower, Chimene was halted by a guard. She handed him her forged ID and he said dubiously, "Maintenance? We haven't called a tech."

Chimene gave a long-suffering sigh. "It's always that way. The men in the field are the last to know." She shrugged. "Look, all I know is administration said to give all equipment a general check-up. Seems there's a rebel alert and they don't want anything strategic blowing at the wrong time."

The guard nodded. "Makes sense."

Chimene stiffened. If it made sense, it was most obviously not a general order from administration. The lowest-ranking plebe in the academy knew better than to expect sense from the brass.

The same thought must have occurred to the guard, because he put out an armored hand. "Your written orders?"

"How long have you been decanted, son? You know general orders are verbal. If I had a specific job I'd have the orders cut and dried. But this is just a routine inspection. That's why administration sent a supervisor." She flicked her ID out of his hand. "And at my level, I do have clearance for the tower."

She paused and eyed him consideringly. "Of course, I could always tell Lord Vader I was unable to make the inspection he wanted. And why."

The guard drew himself up and passed her into the tower without another word. Chimene strode briskly to the elevator banks, rang for a car, and took it to the third underground level. She entered the mess hall as nonchalantly as possible, although being so far underground, away from a quick escape route, in enemy territory, made her uneasy.

Mattes was the first to arrive at this rendezvous point. Chimene noted his air of suppressed excitement. "Any trouble getting in?"

He shook his head, then grinned. "And I took out the alarm systems, so Hallie should have no problems at all."

"I didn't." Harfor-Lar's voice came over Chimene's shoulder. Chimene and Mattes turned to her. "In fact, I've not had half the fun you and Chimene have had." She shook her head. "Many more raids like this and I'll quit the Alliance for something exciting--like weave-work."

"Yes, well, if we don't get the tower out, we may all have to take up weave-work. In Imperial prisons."

Chimene and Harfor-Lar acknowledged the Major's point. They left the mess hall and headed for the elevator banks. A few knowledgeable twists of the screw-driver, and both banks were out of commission. Harfor-Lar added a compression bomb to be on the safe side. With well-practiced ease, they continued about their job. Harfor-Lar and Mattes calmly closed and sealed all entrance ways to the tower while Chimene stood guard.

"It seems strange to be closing doors for a change, instead of opening them," Harfor-Lar remarked.

Mattes did not even lift his head from the task at hand. "Remember one thing, if they get alerted to our presence before the dump blows, their demo experts are as good as we are."

So make sure you use every under-handed booby-trap you can think of to stall them." As he spoke, he delicately settled a non-magnetic anti-disturbance device into the lock he was working on.

Harfor-Lar nodded, and Chimene could see that she added a few innovations of her own to her job.

As they got closer to the main control room of the tower, conversation died. Chimene knew that, if they blew the game this close to success, they'd better hope the enemy killed them. Otherwise, if they ever escaped, Leia Organa'd be after their heads.

They reached the last corridor. Two stormtroopers stood guard outside the control room of the tower. Protecting her primed blaster from sight behind her clipboard, Chimene walked down the hall. The two troopers closed ranks.

"Your pass, technician?" one of them asked politely.

Chimene made a motion as though reaching for her ID. "Just a routine maintenance check, you understand."

"Yes, technician. Your pass?"

Chimene smiled. "Of course," she said. She shot the first trooper before he could suspect a thing, blasted the second before he could draw a weapon. Mattes and Harfor-Lar joined her at a run. The three SWIPE members blasted open the control room doors and catapulted into the room, guns blazing. The unarmed technicians died under their concentrated fire, and the surprised guard fared no better.

Mattes took off his cap and wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "I hate to mention it, but we just may succeed."

Chimene, who had been looking around thoughtfully, hardly noticed his words. She pointed to the only other door in the room. "Trouble?" she asked.

Mattes pulled a computer clearance card from a dead technician's pocket. He fed it into the wall-computer and called up a map of the tower. A pleased expression was on his face as he turned and said, "No, what may be our way out. A flight of stairs to the officer's hangar on top of the tower."

"Any vehicles there?"

"Let's check." He scanned the records and smiled. "Several have been checked in today, and are still parked there. According to the attendant's log, they're fueled and waiting." He patted the computer.

Chimene's smile answered his own. "It's nice to have an escape route for a change."

"The princess might be thinking the same thing about now," Harfor-Lar commented.

Almost as though her words were a signal, a rebel transmission reached them.

"Tower, this is Armed Troop Ship XVTS234-0, requesting tower clearance."

"Shall we do what we're paid for?" Mattes directed Chimene to the tower controls, and he and Harfor-Lar took up defensive guard positions.

*

"Troop Ship XVTS234-0, this is Tower Clearance Control Officer JY8019. You are cleared for take-off."

"That's Magi," Leia nodded, pounding Han on the back in an unprincessly display of emotion. "We did it! We really did it!"

Chewie's happy growl reverberated off the walls.

"Right, Your Worship. Now let's see if we can get ourselves away before the field blows. You and Luke go belt yourselves in. This trip may be bumpy." Han reached for the comset as they obeyed. "Tower, this is the *Central Suns III*, RG1798, requesting clearance. Please respond."

The reply was gratifyingly prompt. "*Central Suns III*, this is tower control. You are cleared for take-off in 5.9 minutes. Use flight path 307z."

Han acknowledged the order and made the preparations necessary for take-off. The troop ship took off and the *Falcon* followed almost immediately after. The ship cleared gravity and Han swung her into the long elliptical curve that would carry her safely past the outer planets. Chewie wrinkled his nose at Han and snuffled his congratulations for a smooth take-off.

Luke and Leia rejoined them in the cockpit. "Did we make it?" Luke asked wonderingly. "No one is following us?"

Han pointed to the drydock floating in synchronous orbit over Cinninnatus. "Once we get past that, if there are no picket ships alerted, we--oh, shit."

"Han, what is it? What--"

Han shook his head. "I'm sorry, Your Worship, I really am. For a bit there I thought we'd make it. But all bets are off, now. In fact, we might's well save time and trouble and kite off for parts unknown."

"Han Solo, if you don't explain--"

Han slammed his hand against the front console of the ship. "It doesn't make a damn bit of difference if they do blow the field and the dump, Princess." He pointed once more to the drydock. "See those tanks attached to the Star-Destroyers by tow lines? Those are automated barges. No matter what we do, Vader'll still send a fleet to Massassi. Those cruisers will be fueled and loaded,

ready to go."

Luke's voice was hesitant. "With only four--"

Han had gone beyond anger. "With the TIE carrying ability and the firepower in just one of those babies, you could destroy Massassi." He shrugged. "Oh, yeah. Vader's got all the power he needs, damn him to Chaos."

The relief of their escape was gone. "Isn't there anything we can do, Han?"

"I don't know, Luke. I just don't know." The Corellian turned to his co-pilot. "Chewie, once we're past the drydock, I want you to pull around behind the planet. Make like we're heading off at a sloped pace. We can hang off Dardanel, monitor the official channels until our ships are clear. Maybe I can think of something to take out the drydock in the meantime."

"Chealiogertoutylercgh," the wookiee growled, blinking his blue eyes. "Sme-aghtuilar."

"I know, Chewie, I know. That's the only thing I can think of, too."

"Wha--"

"Nothin', Luke. Look, you and Leia go back inside and belt down again. We may be doin' some fancy maneuvering in a minute." He paused, then added, "Kids, when I give the word, you two head for an escape pod." His fingers played over the navicomputer a moment, then he took out a tape. He gave it to Luke. "Feed this into the pod's 'puter, Luke. It's preprogrammed to get you to rendezvous."

Luke glanced to Leia, then took the tape. The princess gave Han a long, hard look, then turned on her heel and left the cockpit without a word. Luke looked after her, then glanced back to Han.

"Han, I--"

"Inside, kid. I want you belted in."

Luke left the cockpit.

Chewbacca uttered a questioning growl and cocked his head. Han did not look at him. "Don't look at me like that," he said. "I know what I'm doing."

*

"The *Falcon* is clear, Mattes, but Solo's pulled her shadow-ward of the planet."

Mattes Magi nodded. "Good move. Probably wants to make sure nothing goes wrong here, or with the rest of the ships before he heads for rendezvous."

The three person SWIPE team methodically went about their task. Only one more ship was scheduled for take-off when an outside call for clearance came over the commset.

Chimene locked glances with Mattes. "Ignore it," he said. "If we answer, they'll be alerted to trouble anyway, so don't take the time out to fool around with them."

She nodded and contacted the last of the Alliance ships. "Armed Freight and Troop Transport CVY-459cf. This is the tower. Your departure time has been moved up to 1017 local time. Please respond."

"This is transport CVY-4593cf to the tower. Message received and understood. Ready to depart. Clear us for take-off."

The tower was shaken by a sudden explosion. "Sounds like the main tower door," Harfor-Lar said matter-of-factly. "Hope they like our greeting."

"We'll know soon," Mattes said. "That ship off yet, Chimene?"

Another explosion rocked the control room. "Better hurry," Harfor-Lar added. "That was the elevator lobby. Vader'll

flush us out if he has to sacrifice the entire base."

Chimene kept her eyes on the tactical screen in front of her. "She's taking off. . . now! Okay, let's go."

They headed for the door to the roof. Mattes threw a few well-timed incendiary devices behind him and Harfor-Lar raked a blazing path across the equipment with her blaster. "That should cut down on operations here," the major remarked. They raced up the stairs to the roof-top docking area.

They looked around at the small, personal vehicles parked there. "That one," Chimene pointed to a small Coribat over to one side.

"It's rather small, isn't it?" Harfor-Lar asked dubiously.

"It may not look like much," Chimene said as they raced toward it, "but I've driven one of those things before. Believe me, only a StarDestroyer--and maybe the *Falcon*--can outrun her." She opened the door in the side of the small ship, waved the others in. "We can lift off, then dock with the *Falcon* and head back to Massassi."

They strapped themselves in and Chimene pulled back on the Coribat's joystick. The little ship shuddered, then lifted. She was hardly clear of the tower when the supply dump went. One after another, the ships still docked in port exploded. The fuel storage area flared, a sudden burst of flames that sprang kilometers into the air. The tower was the last thing to blow.

"What perfect timing!" Harfor-Lar exclaimed almost reverently.

I think," Mattes said in a satisfied tone, "we can call that a job well done."

Chimene nodded. "A job very well done. And we--oh, no."

"What's wrong?" Mattes asked.

"Chimene, what did you--"

The drydock hung before them. Chimene said nothing, simply pointing to it. She looked at the other two.

Mattes and Hallie exchanged a glance. "All right, Chimene," Mattes said calmly. "Let's finish our job." Harfor-Lar closed her eyes and nodded.

*

At the very select, very exclusive party she was gracing with her presence, Jasne wandered over to the full-length windows looking out over the spread of Cinninnatus below. Even as she leaned casually forward to admire the view, a pillar of fire shot up from the spaceport across the city. With a slight smile, Jasne lifted her glass to her lips. So they'd actually--

Merci,ful Morga. The drydock. Jasne's hand tightened almost imperceptibly on the glass. Ignoring the spectacle of Cinninnatus Spaceport turning into an inferno, she moved closer to the window and looked to the sky.

There was a flareup that lit half the sky and overpowered the flaming spaceport. As other partygoers began crowding the windows, Jasne raised her glass in salute to whoever had taken out the orbiting drydock.

Well, I'll be damned, she thought, smiling. *That bunch of starry-eyed innocents actually did it. I wish you luck, little Leia. You'll need it.*

*

"--and posthumous Brevets of Honor for Major Mattes Magi, Lieutenant Chimene Darklighter, and Lieutenant Harfor-Lar." The princess was sitting in Chewbacca's co-pilot chair while the wookiee was in the engine room, checking out the hyper-

drive. Her voice was subdued as she read the recommendations into the ship's data-bank, subdued as they all had been since they'd watched the SWIPE team ram the drydock's main fuel store.

The mood was in danger of becoming maudlin. Han felt it incumbent on him to get things back on what he considered the proper plane. Setting the controls on automatic, he lounged back in his chair. "And just where are you gonna get these medals, Your Glory? We'll be on the run from now to Doomsday at the rate things've been going wrong around here."

It was the right tack. "Wrong? Han, we've succeeded fantastically well. We got all the ships we need and lost only three warriors." The princess looked almost smug, as though it had all been her idea to start.

And maybe it had, Han conceded, eyeing her appreciatively. She'd not yet changed back into her flight suit, and the gold-layered triangles of her skirt did interesting things to her legs--and to his determination to leave as soon as they cleared Massassi.

"Yes, it seems to have worked out pretty good," Luke said. Han turned around. The kid had entered quietly and was sitting in the navigator's chair. Han noted that Luke was having trouble knowing where to keep his attention. Every time he looked at the princess--or her legs--he'd quickly look away again.

"I can't think of a single loose string," Leia added. "We have our ships, you have your reward, Jasne has her salary, and--"

Han stiffened. "Oh, shit," he said. "Oh, shit, shit, shit." He stared blindly out the canopy into the glowing nebulousity of hyperspace.

Luke and Leia looked at him questioningly.

"Oh, shit," he repeated.

Luke and Leia exchanged a puzzled glance. "Han?" said Luke.

"Oh, shit," Han said hopelessly.

Leia gritted her teeth. "Han Solo, will you please stop repeating that vulgar phrase and tell me what the HELL is wrong?"

Han looked at her with eyes that had turned to dark ice. "I forgot to pay Antibe," he said flatly.

"Oh, shit," said Leia.

EPILOGUE

Antibe frowned at the cowering Servite. "And this occurred today?"

The avian shivered at the deceptive gentleness in Antibe's voice.

"And the authorities suspect rebels?"

"Yes, mistress."

Antibe inserted the holo-cassette the Servite had given her into the transcoder. A jerky, poorly edited image of a ship taking off appeared. The *Millennium Falcon*. Moments later, the three-dimensional image shifted and fluttered. When it aligned itself once more, the entire field was aflame.

"Solo." Antibe's voice was very soft. She leaned over her desk, pressed the botton on her communicatons console.

"Send for Boba Fett."

CATHERINE WHEEL

Y65M1D32Hr1325-2015ST

Leia Organa stared over her shoulder at Han Solo. Shock and hurt incredulity flared in her eyes. "Going? What do you mean, going?"

Han bridled, spoke defensively. "Look, princess, I'm not signed on with this outfit. I'm here strictly in--in an advisory capacity."

"Advisory?" The princess's voice rose an octave on the single word, and scorn colored the air. "Solo, you couldn't advise your way out of a styrene bag."

Han spun Leia's chair so she faced him directly. "That's not what you said when you needed those transports." He raised his voice to a mocking, sweet falsetto. "'Help me steal some space ships, Han? Please, Han? Sweet Han?'"

Leia glared at him. "I never said any such thing!"

He straightened abruptly. "You don't own me, Your Royalness, and neither does this rebellion." Pushing past Leia, he stared out the *Falcon's* windscreen at the blank metal walls of Corador Base's temporary hangar.

Six months. Six months since he'd helped the Alderaan princess recoup the losses of the Battle of Massassi, and he was still around, a wolvren running tame among the self-appointed guard dogs of the Alliance. And he couldn't explain why. Not to Chewbacca, not to himself.

Even worse, no one questioned his behavior; even Dodonna acted as though he and the *Falcon* were signed on for the duration. Han banged his fist against the glassteel windscreen. *And damn it, the*

way this rebellion's being run, that duration'll be quite some while!

Han spun back to Leia, groaning when he saw her chin at its most arrogant. She'd never listen to him now, but he had to explain.

"Listen, Your Worship, it's not like I want the Imperials to win. Hell, I've had more'n my share of trouble with the white-shells."

Leia snorted. "I'll just bet you have."

Han ignored her and continued. "I got a price on my head. When I didn't get that money to Jabba the Hut the morning we raided Cinnцинatus Port, my head went on the block, and you know it."

The princess's face tightened and she turned away from him. He made a motion as though to touch her, then stopped himself. He stared at her, willing her to listen. "That last run I made, an old--'friend' gave me warning. Jabba's put a price on me three times what I owe. I gotta clear the boards, Princess. If I don't, every bounty hunter and hired killer from here to the Outlands and back to the Core's gonna be after my hide. And a dead smuggler's no good to you or your rebellion."

Leia folded her hands in her lap. She stared down at them, her face a mask. "And then you'll be back." Her words were bare of emotion.

Han shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I--"

She jumped to her feet. "We don't need any reluctant heroes, flyboy!" she said as she started for the door.

Two angry strides brought him to her side. Grabbing her by the shoulders, he swung her around to face him. "Damn it, will you listen?" Their eyes locked. His hands tightened even as his face softened unwillingly. Her eyes questioned him and she leaned toward him. "Leia, I--"

His words shattered the moment and she pulled back. Twisting out of his grip, she slapped his hands away. "No, I won't listen to this nonsense."

Han's face paled, then flamed as though she had struck it. His voice dripped ice. "Thanks, Your Highnessness, glad you think my life is 'nonsense'." He strode from the cockpit. "Chewie!" he yelled, "Get set, we're pulling out now!"

Leia ran after him. "Han, you can't--"

He spun to face her. "No." He held up a warning hand. "I don't and I won't listen to your 'can't'. I do as I damn well please, sweetheart, remember that."

"Hey!" A voice from the hold corridor interrupted them. Han and Leia glowered at the young man standing there, a quizzical smile on his open face. "What's wrong, you two? We can hear you over the thruster Chewie's testing."

"Stay out of this, kid," Han warned, "this is between me and the princess."

Luke Skywalker's gaze flicked between the two combatants. "Now, look, Han, you don't want to--"

Han felt trapped, confined; he fed his anger desperately. "Luke, shut up."

Instantly, Leia's claws emerged. "Don't yell at Luke," she said coldly.

"Hey, I can fight my own battles," Luke protested.

Han bowed in the princess's direction. "Yes, Your Worship. As you say, Your Wor-

ship. Anything you command, Your Worship."

"Oooo00-000ooooohh!!!" Leia swung at him. He ducked, and the force of her blow spun her around.

He caught her, turned her to face him, then shook her. "Simmer down, Your Mightiness." He waited for her fury to fade before he released her. She rubbed her arms angrily, but made no other movement against him.

Han's anger died as quickly as it had sprung up. He rubbed his palm across his mouth. "Look, I'm sorry, but leave me alone, both of you."

"With pleasure, Solo." Leia straightened her tunic. She glared at him, daring him to make further comment. "And don't call us, because we won't call you," she snarled through gritted teeth. "Come on, Luke."

She stalked from the common room, tripping over a foot-locker on the way, and stomped down the ramp of the *Falcon*. Bitterly considering 'might-have-beens', Han stared after her. Wiping all emotion from his face, he turned to Luke. The younger man was staring at him with the same bemused expression he'd use for an unexploded grenade.

"What was that all about?"

"I'm pulling out."

"Oh." Luke's normally vibrant voice was colorless. "I see." His clear blue eyes studied Han searchingly. "That why Leia's so upset?"

Han shook his head. "I don't know what's the matter with her," he said in exasperation. "She always knew I'd be leaving sooner or later. Me and Chewie, we got our own lives to live, and playin' rebel's not in the cards for us."

Luke picked up his yellow flight jacket from the gameboard table and

pulled it on. "I guess not. But I-- but we'd hoped you'd stick around a while."

Wearily, Han shut his eyes. If the kid started in on him, too-- "I've been here six months, Luke. That's a smuggler's lifetime. Don't ask what I can't give."

Luke did not answer immediately; curious, Han opened his eyes, glanced over at him. The younger man was staring at a point buried somewhere in the bulkhead wall. "Luke? You okay?"

Slowly, Luke brought his eyes back into focus. He nodded thoughtfully and said, "Lythne was right when she said you like doing what you do, wasn't she?"

Han clenched his fists and looked away. "Look, kid, I--"

Luke smiled, gripped Han's arm. "That's okay, you have to 'follow your own path'." He gave a short laugh. "Now to convince the princess of that!" The smuggler and the ex-farmboy stared at each other. Finally Luke said, "Han, may the Force be with you." Nothing else needed to be said. Han nodded and Luke left the ship.

Mouth clamped tight against the wish to call Luke back, Han stared after his friend. Then he took a deep breath and flicked his glance around the empty common room. Into the deafening silence he said, "You're really bright, Solo. Any more brains and you'd qualify for a brain-burn case. Wha'd'ya do for an encore?" He ran a hand through his hair and wondered why he felt as empty as the room. *I've got no other choice, damn it, none.*

"Chewie!" he shouted, "Let's go!"

*

"Luke! Hey, Luke, wait up!"

Eager to catch up to the princess, Luke turned impatiently at the call. "What is it, Tor? I don't have all day."

Torbett Hadaway slid to a halt. "Okay, if you're not interested in a mission that just came in. . . ." His voice trailed off suggestively.

Trying to keep Leia in sight, Luke asked Torbett suspiciously, "What mission? I'm in no mood for games."

"A rebel cell on Kasulur's pulled the deployment schedule for the 10th fleet and the tapes have to be brought back for the brass." In his visible excitement, Torbett stood bouncing on his toes.

"Yeah, fine. What do you--" The impact of the black youth's words struck Luke and he gave Torbett his attention. "Hey! That's great! Our infiltration teams are finally coming through. But what--" His eyes opened wide. "Kasulur? But you-- Oh, wow! Did Dodonna say you could go?"

"Didn't ask."

"Why? You're a natural!"

"Thought it'd be more fun with two going." Torbett grinned, the gleaming teeth white against the smooth dark skin. He punched Luke on the arm.

Luke's grin matched his friend's. He clasped Torbett's shoulder. "You better believe it! Corador's a 'temperate paradise, far removed from the active spacelanes', all right," he said, mimicking Dodonna's dry professorial tones with deadly accuracy, "but I'm bored." And be even more bored, now Han's leaving. What'll Leia-- He buried the thought.

Torbett nodded. "Sometimes I think I joined the Alliance just to twiddle my thumbs."

Luke laughed. "Han says war means

waiting, and waiting, and waiting. I think he's right." He peered down the path Leia'd taken, but didn't spot her. He hesitated, torn between the need to soothe the princess's ruffled feathers and the desire to nail down a mission.

"Do you think Dodonna and Willard'll let us go, Luke?"

Enviously, Luke glanced at his younger friend. "You're a natural. You've got family there, you went to school there, you--" He paused and tilted his head questioningly. "Any warrants?" An expression almost of regret flitting across his features, Torbett shook his head.

"Then command doesn't have a thing to worry about. You won't even need a disguise. You can visit your folks. What could be simpler?"

Torbett flicked a sidelong glance at Luke. "Yeah, well, what about you? Got an up-to-date ID that doesn't say 'Hero of the Alliance'?"

Thoughtfully, Luke met Torbett's calculating glance. Then he nodded. His grin stretched from ear to ear. "It's absolutely unbreakable," he said proudly. "Han made it for me."

"Well, then?" Torbett dared him.

Luke hesitated only a minute. With Corador Base complete and Han leaving, there would be only so much excitement to be milked from simulated battles in the training center. And he was bored already. Leia's administrative duties kept her busy; if he could find some way to help the Alliance, too-- "Come on," he countered Torbett's taunt. "Let's tackle the brass now." The two young men broke into a run and jostled for first place as they headed for the administration bunkers.

"You want to volunteer for what?" General Dodonna gazed disbelievingly at

Luke and Torbett. "Have you lost your minds? You're fighter pilots, not intelligence agents."

Realizing that Torbett's arguments were the ones that might sell the general on their scheme, Luke hung back. Torbett flashed a winning smile at Dodonna. "What could go wrong, sir? It's a routine pickup. The Imps won't suspect a thing."

Dodonna frowned and shuffled through a stack of reports on his desk. Shaking his head, he said, "You have no training in infiltration. I simply cannot risk you. At the first indication of trouble, the Imperials will call in the 10th Fleet and initiate full-scale search and seizure proceedings."

Torbett flashed Luke a glance of appeal. Feeling out of his element, Luke said, "All the more reason we should go, sir. If there's the slightest suspicion that the tapes have been duped, Kasulur'll be closed tighter'n a rain-drum. Anyone going in or out'll be fully checked. My ID's unbreakable and Tor's is real." Luke threw a casual arm around Torbett's shoulders. "Two students on vacation. What's more normal than that?"

Dodonna's uncertain gaze shifted from Luke to Torbett and back again. He cleared his throat. "The princess--"

"--is not involved in espionage work," Luke interrupted. He wasn't sure he and Torbett were making the right move, pressing the general for this mission; however, he was certain of one thing: Leia'd put a stop to their activity if she caught wind of it.

"You're two of our best pilots," Dodonna said. "If anything goes wrong, Commander Liwan will have my head. You know how short-handed we are."

Luke felt a rush of triumph. "We'll be even more short-handed if we don't get that tape. Vader heads the 10th, and you know how good he is at smelling

out our operations. If we know in advance what sector he's in, we can fly rings around him." The adrenalin roared through Luke's body and he bent his entire will to convincing General Dodonna that he and Torbett were the logical couriers to send. Luke marshalled all his arguments, presented the case as strongly as he could. ". . . and best of all," he concluded, "if the Imps check up on us, they'll get real backgrounding." He looked at Dodonna expectantly. The urgency of his desire for this mission sang in his veins. Eventually, as reluctantly as though he still doubted the wisdom of such a plan, Dodonna nodded.

Weak with relief, Luke almost stumbled to the ground when Torbett slapped him on the back. "Luke, we did it! No more thumb twiddling!" The black youth turned back to Dodonna and came to attention. "Sorry, sir, I--I got a bit carried away." A grin broke across his face. "Permission to leave, sir?"

Nodding, Dodonna waved the two young men out of his office. A puzzled frown creased his forehead. "Now, why ever did I--" Luke smiled and closed the door.

*

Han's voice was soft, and reasoned, and deadly polite. "Rearrange your schedule as much as you want, Control. I'm taking off in five minutes."

The more quietly Han spoke, the more harassed the Chief Controller sounded. He invariably lost this argument to the Corellian. "You're not cleared for take off, *Falcon*. If you--"

"No ifs. You have five minutes. Then, if I'm not cleared, I go through the hangar doors." Han clicked off the outside line and switched to intercom. "Chewie, if you don't get your carcass up here now, you'll make the jump in the

engine room."

Ignoring the wookiee's bitter comments about this unwarranted rush after months of sloth, Han ran his final preflight checkdown. He was pushing some of the *Falcon*'s equipment to the limit, and the entire engine substructure needed an overhaul, but time was against him. He'd been given clear warning. Kiss Jabba the Hut's boots or have the most expensive deathmark of all time on his brow. All told, Han thought he'd better grovel.

He reopened the outside line. "The *Falcon* cleared yet, Control?"

"All systems are go, Solo, but General Dodonna wants--"

"Can it. Once he starts talking I'll never get off planet." The door behind him slid open and Chewbacca lumbered into the cockpit, then squeezed into his seat. "Control, immediate clearance needed."

Control sighed. The huge hangar doors rumbled open. "Clearance granted--"

"Hit it, Chewie." Han punched the flight pattern on his half of the board; with the ease of long standing custom, the wookiee matched his every move.

"--*Falcon*," the Controller's long-suffering voice concluded.

Servomotor relays clicked and the *Millennium Falcon* hovered above the floor of the hangar. Then the freighter slid forward, out the doors, and sliced into the darkening sky.

*

Even filtered through the monitoring system, the *Falcon*'s roar was unmistakable, and reverberated from the walls of Leia's quarters. Her blank eyes

lifted skyward, tracing an imaginary trajectory until the sounds died completely. Then, still as one in a trance, she shut off the comm-unit and walked blindly across the small room.

She took a ragged breath and tried to order her chaotic thoughts. Even in her hurt and anger, she'd never thought Han would really leave. Now-- Had she expected too much? Had the offer in his eyes been but a reflection of her own half-formed thoughts, and not his at all? How could he leave her--them like this?

They needed that cocky Corellian.

She picked up the small holocube from her nightstand and shook it to reveal the three laughing images reflected within. Luke, Han, herself.

Dana Moran, the young ex-Guardsman serving as Dodonna's aide, had snapped the holo-pic the day they finally finished the subterranean base, and. . .

. . . Sweet Mother! That was three months ago. And already we run short of time and men.

Leia sank onto the bed, the holocube a cool solidity in her cupped hands. It was the memory of that day, captured forever by Dana's camera work, that had made her so sure of Han and of Luke, and of their commitment to her--and to her revolution. Could she have been wrong?

Sunlight, and an autumn-scented breeze ruffling her hair. A happy, childlike smile on her face when she stole a day out of the rebellion for simple pleasure. Han's grin matching hers and Luke's as he hugged them both.

Dana clicking the camera, and her squeal of outrage one second later when a sly hand snaked around to pinch her. Her furious pursuit of Han--until he let her catch him--and

Luke's howls of laughter when his prank succeeded so well. . .

She set the holocube back on the nightstand. *That was playtime, Leia. This is the real world.* And in this so very real world, Han Solo and his ladybird had taken off.

Resolutely, Leia straightened her back and lifted her chin. If she had to, she'd go on without him. She stood and walked from the room.

*

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"--cleared for take off."

"Thanks, Jher, *Freedom's Raiders* out." Luke engaged the thrusters and the small craft lifted, reaching within minutes for the deeper edge of space.

Behind him, Torbett laughed. "Boy, you really have a way with names! Are you really planning to fly into an Imp port with a name like that?"

Luke grinned. "She's the *Lady Saralínah* on ship's papers."

"The *Lady*-- Luke, that's just as bad! She's a two-man scout, not a cruiser!"

Luke's grin widened. "Can you think of a better name when she's owned by a space-happy kid on vacation from the Academy?"

"Is she?" Torbett sounded doubtful.

"That's what my ID says." Luke shook his head in wonder. "I don't know how Han did it, but 'Larens Olnes' is even registered and on the Academy roster." He glanced over his shoulder at Torbett. "Grades and everything."

"Straight A's, I suppose?"

Luke laughed and shook his head. "Han said he was a crook, not a miracle worker, and I could take something he called a 'gentleman's C' and like it." He shrugged. "Anyway, I won't be surprised if a completion cert gets faxed to one of our drop points at the end of the semester."

"That's pretty fancy backgrounding for an ID," Torbett said admiringly. "Is Solo always that careful?"

Luke remembered the dressings-down Han had given him whenever he was not just as careful. "His life depends on it, Tor. Willard says our loss of agents has dropped way down since Han's been working with us. He's plugged up most of the holes in their IDs." Luke recalled Han's advice. "And Tor, better call me 'Larens' even when we're alone. If we blow this mission we'll never hear the end of it."

"Right, 'Larens'," Torbett said happily. Luke frowned. It was a little late to worry, but he wondered if Torbett had the right attitude for this not-quite game they were playing. Finally he shrugged. What could go wrong? Even Han would describe their mission as a "silk-run, smooth's you like'."

Luke punched the preset sequence on the board and the little scout leaped into hyperspace. "Next stop Kasulur," he crowed.

*

Y65M1D34Hr1600-1800ST

Leia shoved General Paruna's latest intelligence report into her pocket. One more council meeting that ended in a 'shall we, shan't we' quarrel between the Alliance leaders and their line commanders, and she'd--

She slumped in her seat, all fight leaving her. She'd what? The Alliance Council recognized her title as Princess,

extending to her the authority to act as plenipotentiary within the Alliance, but what good did that do? Senior statesmen who had dandled her on their knees all too short a time ago refused to take her seriously, and the younger leaders--those who would listen to her free of memories of the child-Leia--were as frustrated as she by the Council's caution.

"If that windbag doesn't stop prating--"

She smiled sympathetically at Dana Moran. Dodonna's young aide was still fuming over the Council's refusal to launch a strike against the Corellian naval yards. "I know it's hard to just wait, sometimes, but what other choice do we have?"

Dana shoved aside the forms he'd been vetting. "That's the problem, Princess, it isn't just 'sometimes'. Since we came here it's been nothing but 'Wait, wait, wait'." Anger and impatience were clearly written on his face, in his gestures. He tapped the table with his stylus. "If I make one more simulated run, I'll have battle fatigue."

She eyed him thoughtfully, then nodded. Fighting computer readouts frustrated battle-ready troops. She touched his arm, felt the tenseness through his uniform sleeve. "Don't worry, Dana, there'll be time enough for battle." *Time enough? Was there ever really 'time enough'? Time enough for battle? For death?* Her hand tightened on Dana's arm. *And how many more deaths on my soul. Oh, Alderaan. . .* "There'll be time."

She turned her attention back to the meeting, but Paruna's self-aggrandizing speech could not keep her thoughts from Alderaan. Only Han knew how deeply she blamed herself for Alderaan's death, and with what right.

If she hadn't played at politics. . .



"You prefer another target? A military target? Then name the system." An alerting gesture to an unseen soldier. "I grow tired of waiting."

Her thoughts battered against the walls of her mind like trapped night-things. Stall them, stall Tarkin. Tell him something, anything. Save Alderaan. "Dantooine. They're on Dantooine." Yes. A sop. Offer him a sop. Anything to save Alderaan.

A gloating smile, a shark-slick gash across his face. "You see, Lord Vader? She can be reasonable." A negligent wave of the hand, and, "You may fire when ready."

And those hands. Those black-gloved, iron-banded hands that held her still, forcing her to watch as Alderaan, blue and gold and green in the sun, became an incandescent horror.

. . .if not for her, Alderaan might still live. Someone else could have taken charge of the tapes.

Weary with repeated self-recrimination and guilt, she rubbed her forehead. And that someone else would have failed completely, leaving other worlds to feel the blazing fury of Tarkin's toy. Was one world really that much to pay? For the chance at freedom for all the thousands of worlds now under the yoke of the Empire?

Yes, whispered a small part of her heart. When that world was Alderaan.

*

Y65M1D35Hr1425-1675ST

The *Falcon* dropped out of hyperspace fifteen standard units out from Dardanel. Han cut glances with Chewbacca and gave a 'thumbs up' sign. If the rebs hadn't done a good enough job changing ship's markings, they'd soon know.

Han brought her in slow and easy. As he approached the planet from the sun, he spotted the remains of the orbiting drydock drifting above Cinnцинatus Port like a small, synchronous asteroid belt. He whistled soundlessly. "What shape's the port in?"

Chewbacca lifted his huge, furry shoulders. "Hooriolschmiousiskourr."

Han grunted. "Yeah, I guess we will find out 'soon enough'." He flicked a doubtful look through the canopy. Strange, though, that the debris from the SWIPE team's suicide run at the drydock had not been cleared away after six months. Were the Imperials that harried lately?

The ship-to-planet transceiver crackled. Han barely made out the words through the static. "Identify yourself, identify yourself." Adjusting the ear-jack, Han opened a channel to the Cinnцинatus Port controller.

"Cinnцинatus, this is the *Armageddon*, ship's owner and captain Lomas Tilard piloting, First Mate Koradecachewba aboard. We request an entry pattern and a docking bay assignment."

The comm-unit buzzed, indicating an open channel, but the response was delayed. Then the anonymous voice at the other end said, "State your purpose and registry numbers, *Armageddon*."

If Luke Skywalker were along, Han might have tousled the kid's hair for luck. As it was, he took a deep breath. Now came the part that would fail miserably if there were any hitch in the papers he'd slaved over so long. "Registry HXT-1813. We're sales reps for the Parnell Combine. I'm here to show a new engine design to local importers."

Han ignored Chewbacca's disgusted snort. The wookiee had accused him of outright insanity for hooking his new *persona* to the Parnell Combine, one of the most important manufacturing

families in the galaxy. Granted, it was a risk, Han thought' but if he could carry this off--

"Isn't that ship a bit old for a Parnell Combine rep?" The voice seemed only mildly curious.

Han readjusted the earjack and looked around for inspiration. "Uh, yeah, well, it cuts down in piracy when we ship new designs."

Although Han thought the next pause years-long, a check with his chronometer proved it but seconds. Wondering uneasily if the controller would buy his explanation, he jumped when the voice returned. "No hold on that registry or title, *Armageddon*. Proceed on entry pattern 23d to docking bay 752. Copy?"

"Copy, Control." Han repeated the entry pattern and docking bay assignment. Control confirmed them, and Han signed off. He looked expressively at Chewbacca. "That was close. I expected them to put a make on her." He patted the *Falcon*'s control panel fondly.

"Drianslourghtor," Chewbacca agreed. "Seiarooreslsch," he added warningly.

Han glared at the wookiee. "Of course it's not over yet. How stupid do you think I am?" He held up a warning hand as Chewbacca opened his mouth to respond. "And don't answer that. Not unless you want me to get a new partner." The wookiee blinked his blue eyes twice and grinned, his lips drawing back from his sharply pointed teeth and his black nose crinkling.

"Murfleslorgh," he said succinctly.

Han laughed and turned to the flight panel. His hands danced across its surface in an intricate pattern that sent the *Falcon* knifing through Dardenel's cloud-cover.

As the small ship approached Cinnцинatus Port, Han sobered. By now, Jabba had given the order to shoot first

and worry about his money afterward. Han swore. He might have become addicted to the spice danger gave his life --why else had he stayed this long with the rebellion?--but there were limits. Jabba's deathmark wasn't spice, it was unadulterated poison.

The *Falcon* swooped over the port on a low, wide approach angle. At Chewbacca's chortle of amusement, Han lifted his eyes from the terrain scanning system and glanced out the windscreen. His mouth dropped as he surveyed the results of Leia's SWIPE team. Cinnцинatus Port, once the biggest, busiest, most important port in the quadrant, sported gaping craters in place of the fuel depot and the control tower. The new tower looked distinctly skeletal and 'temporary', and rubble filled several unoccupied docking bays they skimmed over.

Closing his mouth with an audible gulp, Han said, "Good thing that SWIPE team was on the princess's side. Can you imagine what they'd've done to Massassi if they'd been spies?"

"Hellioourtgonn."

"And then some."

Without incident, the *Falcon* reached its assigned docking bay. She hovered over the poured concrete floor, then came to a rest as her a-gravs kicked in and gently lowered her. Han flicked the drive into neutral and said, "Chewie, stay with the ship--and keep her ready for immediate take-off. We may be leaving in one hell of a rush." Reaching back, he extracted a tape from ship's log and gave it to the wookiee. "You know what this is. If I'm not back by 2400 hours, hightail it back to Corador and get this to the princess." He swallowed deeply. "And listen, furball, you take care of yourself, hear?"

The wookiee stared at the tape Han had just handed him--the quit claim to the *Falcon*, ceding all rights and ownership to the princess--and hooted

sorrowfully. Han grimaced. "Cheer up, lug. With my luck, I'll be all right." *Yeah, with my luck.* He hoped Chewbacca hadn't noticed how that luck had deserted him lately.

Han stood and patted the wookiee self-consciously on the shoulder. Chewbacca fleetingly laid his furry paw on Han's wrist, then growled a determinedly unconcerned farewell. Han nodded and turned. Whistling tunelessly, he strode from the cockpit.

*

Leia rested her chin on her steepled fingers. If just one more general, just one more admiral, suggested they send out feelers to the so-called 'aligned' worlds, asking for tangible proof of their support, she would scream. When would the Alliance leaders realize that the cautious governments and world families of other systems would openly ally themselves with the Alliance--which was, after all, but a cadre of traitors against the legal government--only when that Alliance proved militarily secure?

Bankers! That's what princes and presidents think like, bankers. We'll only wangle military aid when we can prove we don't need it. Like a loan.

"We played this scene yesterday," Dana Moran leaned over to whisper in her ear.

She nodded. "And we'll play it tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after--until we die of boredom," she whispered back.

He shifted in his seat. "At the rate we're not fighting this war, we'll be dead and buried before we engage the enemy again. Like him." He pointed toward the far end of the table where General Kolren Paruna, head of Intelligence, was droning on about the recent cessation in Imperial operations. Then

Dana glared at Leia as though the Alliance's corresponding inactivity were all her fault. "Your Highness, the newstapes describe the destruction of Alderaan as 'the greatest natural disaster of all time' and blame the blow-up of the Death Star on a 'mal-functioning engine'. Any moral victory we might have gained is gone, and thanks to them," his caustic glance raked over the military leaders at this session, "we can't gain any other kind."

Frowning, Leia traced a random design on the table. The Empire controlled all official means of communication, true. But Alderaan had been a major shipping and banking world. Surely enough freighters and cruisers were in or near the system at the time of Alderaan's death that someone had escaped disaster to spread the true story? If not, if Alderaan were not only dead, but unmourned. . .

No, never unmourned. Not so long as one Alderaani still lives. I shall see to that. She clutched her elbows, holding her sorrow close. I wish I were a poet, or had troubador blood. I'd write a lament for lost Alderaan, one to move the worlds.

She glanced over at Dodonna, seemingly absorbed by Paruna's speech. Did he, did any of the older leaders know how disaffected the younger leaders and the fighting men had become? Surely they'd not be so sure of victory if they did?

"No!" Dana jumped to his feet to protest Paruna's assessment of the current situation. Leia straightened. She agreed with the young ex-Guardsman's desire for action, but was bound by the longer view. She feared the structure of the Alliance would crumble in the carping and the in-fighting that inevitably followed enforced idleness. It was up to her to keep that from happening.

At least when this is over I can open the 'Leia Organa School of Creative

Diplomacy'. Satisfaction guaranteed or we'll blow you away. She rose to her feet. "Gentles, let's not lose sight of our main goal. We--"

*

Luke took the sharp curve at full speed, almost tipping the aircar. Thrown hard against the door, Torbett righted himself and glared. "For the love of the All, will you watch it?" He rubbed his shoulder. "If I didn't know you were one of the best pilots in the Alliance, I'd think you got your license at discount."

"Relax, will you?" I've been driving since I was six."

"How many accidents?" Torbett demanded.

"Accidents? Me?" Luke said with an air of outraged virtue.

Torbett winced as Luke missed a boulder in the road by centimeters. He closed his eyes tightly. "If Tatooine had any traffic worth mentioning, you'd have been smeared over the landscape years ago." He opened his eyes and looked around to get his bearings. "We'll be coming up on Andrasar in a few minutes. Think you can force yourself to obey the speed limit?"

Luke grinned across at him. "It'll be tame, but I can try."

"Gee, I'm real sorry, General Dodonna, but Luke couldn't come back to the base. He's in jail for speeding." Torbett shook his head. "I think you-- LUKE!" Torbett turned five shades lighter and grabbed the dashboard as the aircar took a sudden dip. "Watch the ✓ road! You should have missed that hole."

"Tor, relax, I've never crashed yet." Luke's expression sobered. "But remember what I said about names. Call me 'Larens'. Han says it's the little things that trip people up."

Torbett nodded shame-facedly. "I know, you warned me. It's just, I think I'd feel better if I were driving?" he offered tentatively.

"I'll be careful, I'll be careful." Luke took his hands from the controls and held them out in an open shrug. "See how careful I can be?" At Torbett's desperate moan, Luke grinned and put his hands back on the wheel. They approached Andrasar's city walls and Luke slowed the sleek rented aircar to a speed fit to disgrace an arthritic millipede.

Torbett snorted and settled back in his seat. "And you're up for promotion? Boy, Dodonna should see you now. He'd really get an eyeful."

The bantering abruptly halted when a detachment of armored stormtroopers blocked their way. Luke pulled to a dead stop.

An unhelmeted trooper bearing the orange shoulder-guard and markings of a sergeant stepped forward and held out his hand. "IDs?"

Carefully not meeting each other's eyes, Luke and Torbett reached into the inner pockets of their tunics and pulled out the flexible plasticene strips that served as identification and credit vouchers. They handed them to the sergeant; without glancing at them, he passed them on to a recruit. The recruit fed the chits into a portable scanner and studied the read-out.

"In order, sir," he said, handing the IDs back to the sergeant.

The sergeant peered at the vouchers. "Hadaway? Olmes? In town for the governor's birthday celebrations?"

Luke shook his head. "School vacation. Tor's invited me to meet his folks."

In the bored tones of one repeating a passage by rote, the sergeant said,

"Personal weapons, portable munitions, controlled substances, and off-world currency are illegal within city limits. Anything to declare?"

Luke and Torbett loudly denied possession of any contraband items. Stepping forward, one of the recruits ran a scan of them and of their aircar. Luke breathed a sigh of relief that he had left his lightsabre and his blaster on the base.

"All clear, sir," the recruit said.

"Fine, fine." The sergeant, plainly both bored and uninterested, handed back their ID chits. "Move along," he said, waving them through the porticoed gates of the city. Only when they were out of sight of the soldiers did Luke relax.

Then he slid the aircar into the slower traffic lanes and looked around for his first glimpse of the fabled city. The sun-baked stones of the streets, worn to a smooth finish by generations of use, glowed a rich caramel, and the two- and three-storied houses struck him as much more suitable for living in than the sky-highs of Cinninnatus, the only other city of such age and importance he had ever visited. As with Cinninnatus, the crowds in this bustling market city varied greatly.

Maneuvering around a small party of Gnossians, Luke planned his next move. They'd drop off their luggage at Torbett's house, meet their contact, and then relax for a pleasant 'at-home' evening with Torbett's family. Nothing there the Imperials could question. And with the ID Han had given him, with his eyes and hair dyed grey and brown to match the 'Larens Olnes' persona, Luke felt secure.

He'd seen no evidence to support Han's warning that the Empire had a 'make' on him from security film footage taken aboard the Death Star. And until he did, he saw no reason to

hide away on Corador, when he could offer his services to the Alliance like this. Leia would be proud of him. *'Sides, Han's wanted on more boards than I am, and that doesn't keep him tied to base. So why should I stay put?*

"Traffic is restricted in the inner city, Larens, so turn left at the next corner, then a right for three more blocks and another left."

Following Torbett's instructions, Luke soon drove through a residential section with tree-lined walks and well-tended gardens. *Aunt Beru would have loved this place*, he thought with the pang of guilt he felt whenever he remembered her or Uncle Owen. Their deaths seemed so unnecessary.

The gardens opened into expansive lawns and Torbett nudged him. "There, that house over there behind the hedge. Pull up in the coach-way."

Luke turned the aircar into a hidden driveway and stopped in front of the two-story stone structure. He took in the sprawling house, the clipped lawns, the extensive grounds. "This yours?"

Torbett gave Luke a pained look. "No, it's the planetary governor's palace and I'm turning you in for the reward. Of course it's mine, dummy! Why else'd I tell you to pull up here?"

"I'm impressed," Luke admitted as he and Torbett alit from the aircar. By his pioneer standards, the house and grounds were luxurious. "Didn't it feel funny, roughing it at the base?"

Torbett shrugged, and seemed discomfited. "Yeah, well, you know how it is, sometimes you just have to do things."

"Your folks know where you've been?"

"Not where the base is. You know that's top secret." Torbett walked

toward the house. "But they know I'm in the Alliance. We talked it over before I left. My folks are--"

There was a sudden glad shout of "Tor!" and Luke caught a glimpse of flashing dark limbs and a drift of hair like evening clouds across Corador's moons. The girl was tall, slender, and seemed to glow.

"Mila!" Torbett swung the girl in a huge circle. Laughing, he plopped her back on her feet, then turned to Luke. "This is my baby sister, Milasharonaqa." He ducked as she aimed a playful punch at him, then waved his hand vaguely in Luke's direction. "Mila, this is my friend, Lu--" Luke's barely perceptible warning stopped his unwary tongue. "My friend Larens Olmes."

Mila put out both hands, palms upward. Luke met her gesture, palm to palm. She had a soft, gentle aura, did this dark, slender girl who was almost of his height. Luke smiled shyly.

Torbett hugged Luke and Mila. "You've grown, baby sister," he said teasingly, heading them toward the house. "The folks around?"

"Mother's got a class, and father went to the market." Soft and comforting, her voice pleased Luke. He glanced across Torbett, trying to get a clearer picture of her. She was young, vibrant, and-- he noted with surprise--only reasonably pretty rather than the overwhelmingly beautiful creature his mind had first conjured up. For some reason that made him feel more at ease.

The hair, he thought, it's the hair made me think she's beautiful.

Mila slanted a glance toward him, caught him staring, and smiled. Her smile was as infectious as Torbett's. Luke smiled back. This visit would be fun.

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Y65M1D35/36Hr2000-0500ST

"What d'ya mean, Jabba won't see me? Damn you, Antibe, I--"

The coldly beautiful face on the visiphone screen smiled grimly. "No. You listen to me, Solo. You had your chance six months ago. You asked for a grace period and I gave it. But I warned you, miss that deadline and you were a dead man. So don't expect any sympathy around here, flyboy, or a second chance."

Han wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. If he couldn't even see Jabba. . . "Look, Antibe, why'd Jabba send out word he wants to see me if he don't?"

Antibe narrowed brilliant green eyes. "Where did you pick up that little bit of information?"

"Bounty hunter I, uh, ran into over on Ch'nicolr."

"Do you believe everything a bounty hunter tells you?"

Han shrugged. "When he's lyin' there spilling his guts at my feet and wants me to know he's the first in a long line, yes."

Antibe frowned, then smiled grimly. "Sorry, Solo, that sounds like a death-mark, not an engraved invitation to come calling."

A stiff breeze sprang up, flattening Han's sweat-soaked shift against his body. He shivered. "There's a bonus if I'm brought back alive, so there's gotta be some room for bargaining."

She smiled. "No, not with you." Her glance slid past him. "And you were very foolish to call, Solo. Enjoy your stay on Dardanel." The line went dead.

Intuitively, Han dropped to the ground. A blaster shot lanced through the air and burned a gaping hole in the visiphone. One second more and the



hole would have been through him. Han smiled coldly. Contacting the Hut's headquarters had alerted the crime lord's security staff to his whereabouts, but he had avoided a sprung trap in Jabba's home territory. *The odds were the same, Antibe, no matter which road I took. Leastways, this route, I'm still alive.*

But wouldn't be much longer, if he didn't take out that gunman. Han eased his blaster from his holster, then inched out of the light spilling onto the public visiphone stand. With no idea of his opponent's location, he'd have to draw fire.

Han unsnapped the utility pouch on his belt and felt inside for something suitable. He pulled out a small stone, the green-gold Alderaan pebble Leia'd given him last week 'for luck'. He smiled ruefully, remembering that teasing scene. *The kid gets kisses, I get stones. The story of my life.*

He tossed the pebble into the shadows at the edge of the 'phone stand; it landed with a satisfying clatter. A narrow green bolt arrowed out of the darkness. With slow precision, Han took aim at the source of that bright arrow and fired.

The unknown gunman yelped once, then slid to the ground. Han waited several seconds, but heard no further sounds. He backed further into the shadow, then cautiously climbed to his feet. Crouching low, he scurried from darkness to darkness until he neared the fallen gunman.

"You! Assassin!"

Neither sound nor movement answered his hissed greeting. Han stepped closer, slid his foot out to touch something yielding and still. Keeping his blaster at ready, he bent and reached out a hand, then straightened to wipe his sticky fingers on his jeans. Dead. His wild shot had burned through the gunman's chest.

Leia brought me luck after all, he

mused. He hunted for the pebble, finding it easily--the would-be killer's blast had burned a swath dangerously near it. Han grimaced at the accuracy of the shot. Too damn good for one of the space-bos Jabba kept around for dirty work. The Hut must have hired new hands for this job. Complimentary, Han thought, but he'd rather do without the honor and stay alive.

Han flipped the pebble into the air once or twice, then dropped it into his pouch. *Let's see how long this luck'll hold out, Leia. It's one damn long way back to the spaceport, and one or more of Jabba's hired guns on every road.* Still, staying where he was made him too stationary a target. He preferred moving, carrying the fight to the enemy. Caught 'em off guard, it did. He'd always liked that tactic; catch 'em napping, then hit 'em with everything under the suns.

Han headed for the nearest slidewalk. Keeping his blaster drawn and his eyes alert, he hop-scotched from one shadowed lane to another, randomly changing speed and direction to confuse trackers. Not that he could elude a full-blanketed search. Jabba knew he had to head back to the spaceport sooner or later. It was just a matter of where the Hut wanted the final confrontation to be.

And please, Mother, make it the port, where Chewie can be my backup. Unconsciously, he rubbed the side of the pouch in which he'd put his 'lucky stone'.

As though his prayer materialized her, the Gank blocked his way as he rounded the next corner.

*

Luke tossed the tape into the air. "Now that," he said, "is a job I call well done. Very well done." He tossed the tape skyward again and Torbett grabbed it out of the air before he could catch it.

"Told you it'd be easy."

"Yeah, well, Han says a job isn't really over 'til you're back to home base," Luke said as he grabbed for the tape.

A slight tussle resulted. Since Torbett was the taller and outweighed Luke by a good twenty pounds, in spite of being six months younger, the wind-up was not long in doubt. The black youth pocketed the tape and straightened his saffron-hued tunic. "Don't you ever quote anybody but Solo?" he asked curiously.

"Sure, but not when I'm talking about smuggling and spying and stuff," Luke said in reasonable tones.

Torbett shook his head. "Okay, okay, I'll take your word--I mean, Solo's word--for it." He laughed and threw an arm around Luke's shoulders. "I still say this was an easy mission, though. Now let's go home. Mother and father are waiting supper for us."

Luke snaked an arm around Torbett's back and slipped the tape from the other youth's tunic pocket. He held the tape out laughingly and danced back out of Torbett's reach as the other grabbed for the tape once more. "Falling down on the job, Tor," he mocked. "You'll never make it as a spy."

Torbett threw him a look of disgust. "And you talk about me blowing the mission? Why don't you just tell the galaxy who you are, 'Olmes'?"

Luke darted a shame-faced glance around. Torbett was right. He'd been so smug about the little bit he knew, and all the time he was the one with the big mouth. Well, at least they were far enough from the other early evening strollers that they couldn't have been overheard. Could they?

Soberly, Luke and Torbett walked the short distance to the Hadaway house. Luke threw an occasional uneasy

glance over his shoulder, but saw nothing suspicious. He tried to relax, to tell himself they'd be all right. This was an easy mission, nothing to worry about. Han'd been on more difficult missions for the Alliance, and he always made it back.

Luke resolutely ignored the inner voice that said Han had ten years head start on him in the art of disguises and secret missions.

The windows of the Hadaway house glowed with light. Luke paused before climbing the front stairs. Warmth and love and serenity spilled from the house with that light, and it was a warmth Luke could warm his hands at, a warmth that reached out to enfold and beckon him.

A butler-droid opened the door even before they reached the top step. The droid bowed and said, "Your parents await you in the main hall, young sir."

"Thanks, Elfive." Torbett patted one of the droid's upper appendages. "Come on, Larens, let me introduce you around."

Glancing down at his rumpled tunic and slacks, Luke protested, "Shouldn't we clean up first?"

Torbett grinned. "My folks raised a son long enough to not mind honest dirt." He tugged on Luke's sleeve and dragged him into the hall. "Come on, I want you to meet them."

Laughter, and music, and the scent of cinnamon-spice greeted Luke as he entered the large room. The tall black man who rose to his feet at their entrance so closely resembled Torbett that it was easy to see they were father and son. The man was in the proud prime of his years, and Luke envied the muscles rippling under the other's snugly fitting tunic. Head cocked to one side, Luke watched as Torbett and his father embraced, then turned to the serenely regal woman standing in front of the

unlit fireplace.

The bonds of love, of caring, were sharply defined in this family, and Luke's unpractised Jedi senses throbbed to their tangible presence. Almost idly, Luke wondered if he would be any different had Owen and Beru Lars possessed such openness of affection. Not that he doubted their love, he assured that part of him which persisted in thinking and feeling with a dirt-down farmer's instincts, but that their love had always seemed more on a line with duty than a free gift. . .

"Larens!" With a start, he realized Torbett was calling him, an expression of amused tolerance on his face.

"Sorry," Luke said with an embarrassed smile, "I was thinking."

Torbett shook his head in mock disgust. "Thinking. That's always your excuse." He threw his arm around the slighter youth and steered him toward his parents. "Wouldn't be so bad if he didn't start 'thinking' when he's driving, too," he informed them. "He flipped us over twice on the way over here."

"Tor!" Luke's cheeks flamed and Torbett chuckled.

"Almost flipped us," he corrected. "Mother, father, my friend, Larens Olmes." Torbett spoke with pride, and Luke greeted his friend's parents with more presence of mind than he'd possessed but a few seconds earlier. "Larens, my parents, Coven Hadaway and Brinicia Kylar."

Coven Hadaway nodded a greeting and Brinicia Kylar held her hands out to Luke. He met her brief greeting gesture, palm to palm, and sensed the source of the love and warmth in the house; her calm serenity encompassed him, made him feel welcome, soothed the ragged edges of his psyche--edges he'd not even been aware of until this moment. She smiled at him, then moved away.

Mouth agape in wonder, Luke looked after her. *A healer! His thoughts soared. She's a healer! She can teach me--* With a thud, he woke to reality. Brief though his contact with her power had been, he knew she used her gifts instinctively, and had no training or experience to pass on. And he could not teach her. He had floundered over the past six months, practicing the little bit Obi Wan had taught him, painfully learning by trial-and-error to use more of the Force.

Now he felt helpless. Surely there was something he could do to bring her talents to full flowering! He felt a vague warning, as though he were venturing too near a knife-studded pit, and pushed it aside. *Damn! If I could only--* Brinicia Kylar's warm presence interrupted his desperate thoughts. "I'm sorry, Duara Kylar, Duar Hadaway. I greet you in peace."

"Greetings and peace, Duar Olmes," Brinicia Kylar said with a soft smile.

Her husband echoed her words and held out his hand to Luke. "Come, Duar Olmes, join us."

Luke smiled shyly and joined them at the fireplace. The rapid ebb and flow of conversation soon caught him up. He drank in the swirling emotions and feelings of well-being, his desert-bred nature overwhelmed by the abundance.

"Greetings and peace, Duar Olmes," said a soft voice at his elbow. He turned quickly and smiled at Torbett's sister.

"Please," he said as he held out his hands, "Larens."

She nodded calmly. "Larens," she repeated as her hands gently touched his own. "You are twice welcome to this house."

Luke rejoined the general conversation. Already drunk on so rich an emotional atmosphere, he remained keenly

aware of the girl at his side. He closed his eyes, reached out. . .

Flow, flow with the Force. Flow. . .

His mind, tied to shallow images of a mere three dimensions, could not translate the impressions that flooded him. He saw his companions, saw them as in a vision of fantasy; but he saw them true. His mind chose symbols from his own experience with which to compare them; it was inevitable that he saw them in terms of his desert world's most priceless commodity, water.

A steady, ever-flowing river nourished the heart of this family. It sustained and succored, protected and shielded. It had unsuspected depths, was filled with sparkling life. With his new-found vision, Luke did not hesitate to name that river Coven Hadaway.

Brinicia Kylar floated in the small, still pockets of quiet-water lining the river, giving it meaning and direction. She was love, and compassion, and all gentleness.

Torbett was almost a mirror-image of his father, but with darting silver shadows from his mother threaded throughout.

And Mila! She glowed with the golden-turquoise depths of the sudden spring of a desert canyon. . . liquid fire, precious and rare, that watered the oasis.

Flow with the Force, flow. . .

Luke jolted back to awareness with a physical shock. He checked his chronometer. He thought he had been floating free in the Force untold hours, and was surprised to find it but seconds.

So that's part of the Force! That knowing beyond knowledge. He shut his eyes, tried to recapture those Force-heightened impressions. He could not. Giving a small sigh, he opened his eyes

and looked around. *There's so much I have to learn, Ben. If only you were here!*

Luke sensed the Jedi Master's presence. *Time enough. There will be time.*

But time for what? The Empire moved against them, and their victories at Massassi and Cinninnatus weren't worth a damn, not against an Empire that could brush them aside as easily as he himself would swat a sting-nit.

The Obi-Wan presence strengthened, and Luke forced himself back from the precipice of regret. He straightened his shoulders and re-entered the conversation flowing around him. *Time enough.*

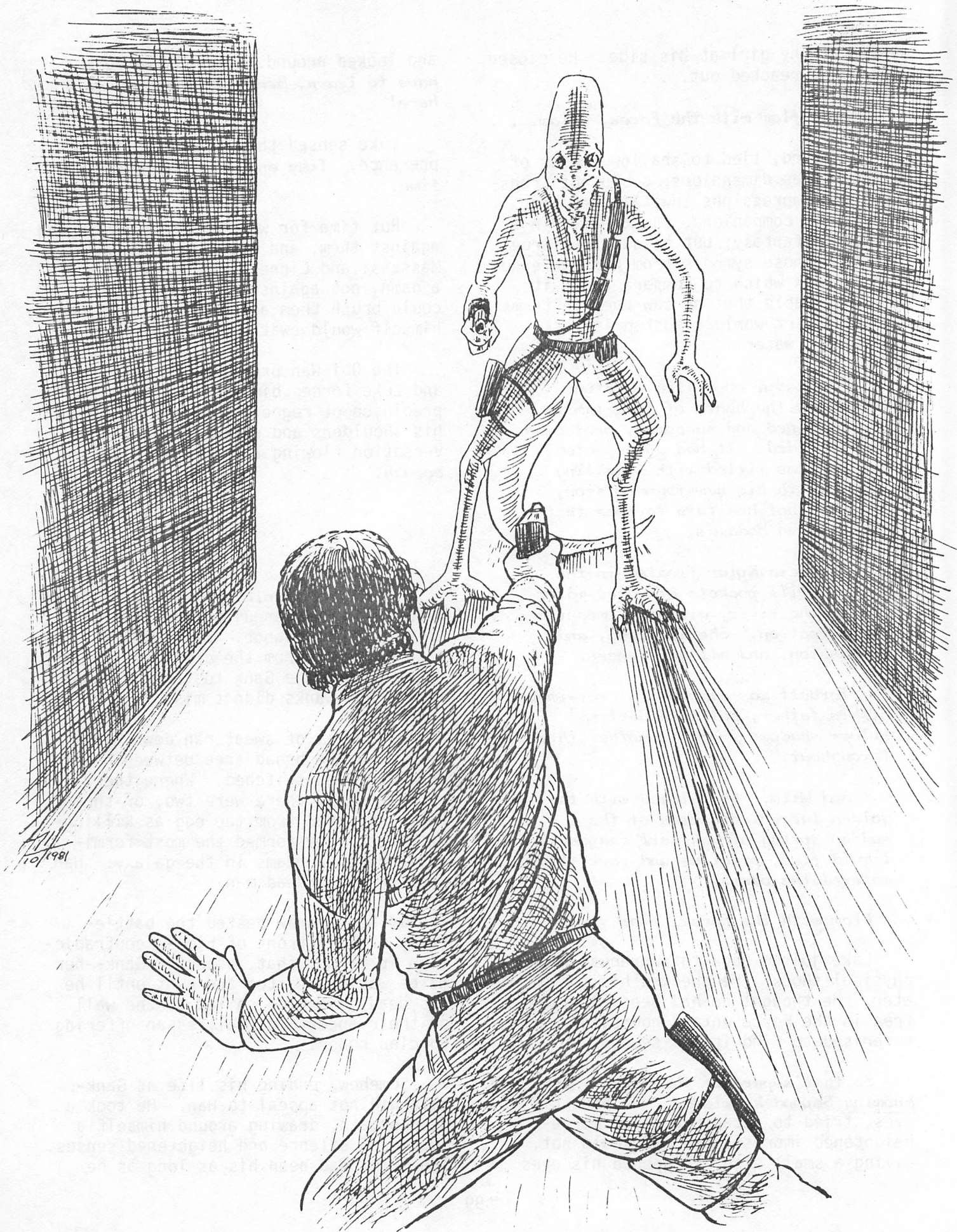
*

No time to panic. The Gank crouched before him, rectangular head swaying in an hypnotic dance. Han dared not take his eyes from the creature. That would signal the Gank to take bead and fire. And Ganks didn't miss.

A rivulet of sweat ran down Han's back, and the broad area between his shoulder blades itched. Where there was one Gank, there were two, or three. Nest-kin, bred from the egg as killing-machines, they formed the most formidable hunting teams in the galaxy. Han knew he was a dead man.

If he somehow bested the battle-ready Gank in front of him--a contradiction in terms, that, a bested Gank--her mates would not stop the hunt until he was dead, his hide nailed to the wall of their ancestors' hall as an offering to clan honor.

Somehow, ending his life as Gank-bait did not appeal to Han. He took a deep breath, drawing around himself a bubble of silence and heightened senses. The skill had been his as long as he



could remember, and had saved his life more than once.

The Gank's right arm snaked downward to the blaster tied low on her hip. Her fabled speed seemed time-drawn slow to his heightened senses. She raised the weapon, pointed it at him, and pulled the trigger. The moment stretched tightly, a bow-string drawn to the snapping point. A lethal green bloom flowered from the nozzle of the Gank's blaster to aim unerringly in Han's direction. The Gank pulled the trigger a second time, and her gun spewed a second deadly bud.

Fighting the time-slowness, Han drew his weapon and ducked to one side as he drew. Movement was difficult, as though through a viscous semi-solid, but the uncanny time-frame from which he operated let him aim carefully. He fired the weapon, watched his own deadly flower arrow toward the Gank.

The Gank's first blast burned into Han's shoulder and he was driven backward. Her second shot scored his arm from shoulder to wrist. His shot struck home and her chest exploded in a fountain of orange arterial blood.

Time righted itself with a lurch and Han stumbled to his knees. He smelled the sickly-sweet stench of charred flesh, his flesh, and knew he would lose the use of his arm if he did not get medical attention. The pain was excruciating and he hovered on the border of unconsciousness. He set his teeth over the pain, knowing he would have to make it back to the *Falcon* for treatment.

Han struggled to his feet. His skill arm dangled uselessly, and his blaster was still clenched in unfeeling fingers. Reaching over with his unhurt left hand, Han pried his fingers apart and removed the weapon. He shoved it into his belt so it would be accessible for a left-hand draw. Then, biting his lips over the waves of agony that washed through him, Han reached across himself again, hauled up his injured arm, and shoved it into the waistband of his trousers.

Drenched with sweat and trembling from the shock, he took several deep breaths, then staggered over to the Gank. He cross-drew his vibro-blade and clicked it on. He fell to his knees and, with a grimace of distaste, sawed off the fleshy wattle beneath the Gank's chin.

When her mates found her, they would know that she had been slain in a fair fight by one who respected her abilities. There was death, Han reflected, and then there was death. If he had to go by a Gank honor coup, he preferred that it be a swift, fair fight; it took many days for those who killed a Gank from hiding to die when they were finally hunted down.

As he hacked away at the fleshy growth, the ripe-fish smell of the Gank drifted upward and Han wrinkled his nose. He thought of the charnel house aroma that clung to Jabba and wondered if the crim czar had Gank blood--or if he chose his assassins by smell alone.

Han's capricious thoughts warned him he would soon be delirious. Despite the pain and the creeping sense of lassitude that threatened to overwhelm him, he forced himself erect. He deactivated his vibro-blade and tuck it into his belt. Awkwardly, he opened his utility-pouch and dropped in the honor-wattle. His eyes fell on Leia's green stone. *Right, Princess, luck for the smuggler.* He fastened the pouch and headed toward the spaceport. *Told you I needed a kiss. Maybe next time you'll listen.*

If there were a next time.

*

"Highness? A word with you?" Dodonna's eager whisper, so unlike his normal dry tones, stopped Leia short as she was leaving the conference room. Ruefully, she looked at the computer read-outs in her arms. If she didn't get this work done tonight, there would,

in the arcane manner of administrative busy-work since the first bureaucrat was hatched, be three times as much due tomorrow, not merely two; it never failed.

She sighed. No matter. Dodonna wanted her attention. "General?" She raised a quizzical brow.

Hooking her elbow with his hand, the elderly military leader steered her out the doorway and down the corridor to his office. Leia smiled reluctantly and shook him off. "General, if Intelligence has faxed us a new map, I really don't have time. Perhaps tomorrow, when--"

"No, not a map, Princess." He leaned around her and palmed open the door, then gestured her in. "Please, enter. I know you'll want to hear this news."

Leia studied him. She seldom saw Jan Dodonna this excited anymore. Not since Alderaan, and the Death Star. She shrugged and entered the room. "All right, General," she said over her shoulder, "but if it's not worth losing a day of work, I'll never let you forget. . . ."

Her voice died as she faced forward and recognized Regin Willard, Kolren Paruna, and Cela Liwan. Leia glanced from Dodonna to Willard to the other leaders of the Alliance. She frowned slightly and shook her head. "I don't understand. Has the Emperor abdicated? Is Vader dead? What's happened?"

"Come, Princess." Paruna held out a chair for her. "We shall discuss the entire situation with you."

The patronizing smile accompanying these words set Leia's teeth on edge. She knew Paruna opposed the Council's granting her the title 'Princess of the Alliance'. What annoyed her was the man's hypocrisy. He did not oppose the rank on grounds of egalitarian rights, a stand she could honor and accept, but on the basis of her age. He thought her 'too young' for such responsibility. *But not too young to risk my life for the Death Star*

tapes. I didn't see you volunteering for a front line mission--General Paruna.

Acknowledging Paruna's presence with a cold smile, Leia pulled out a chair across the table from him. Anger flared briefly in his eyes at her deliberate snub, but he seated himself without comment. Leia gestured the other leaders to chairs around the massive table. She smiled sardonically, her glance playing over each of them. "Well? I assume there is a reason for such a high level meeting?"

General Dodonna leaned forward, excitement clear in every line of his body. "Princess, one of our agents has sent us word of Prince Chalil."

An infectious laugh, a pair of strong hands about her waist, and a swiftly sudden ascent into the air, a swooshing ride that she knew would someday set her free to fly, set her free of the weight of the air and the ground.

"And what does little Leia want? Shall I give her the stars today?"

She laughed, and threaded her small fingers through her brother's silver hair, calling his name to get his attention. "Chalil! Chalil!"

She slipped an icy mask over her features. "My brother has not been seen or heard of in four years. He was taken to Llanderol. He's dead." *Or as good as.*

An almost fatuous smile on his face, Dodonna shook his head. "No, he's still alive. And in good health, our agent says. She says--"

"Princess," Commander Liwan leaned forward intently, "Prince Chalil is to be transferred to a maximum security prison. The Imperials hope to stop any 'poorly advised rescue attempts' that way. We have the schedule."

Leia waited for the commander to make her point. When she said nothing else, Leia shrugged. "All right, we have the transfer schedule." Perplexed, she looked across the table. "So?"

The others exchanged glances, and Leia felt she'd missed a cue. Should she jump up and down and shout in an excess of emotion? Even if she saw a reason for such behavior, she would not act so; she was a very self-contained person. "How thoroughly has the information been checked?" she asked.

"Completely, Your Highness," Paruna said proudly. "This information is from one of my most trusted agents."

Leia eyed him sardonically. "Fine. You trust the agent. Can we trust his information?"

Paruna stiffened. "The information was, of course, verified against outside sources, Your Highness."

"All right, the information is verified." Leia looked around in bewilderment. "I still don't know what you want to do with it."

Willard leaned forward. "Princess, we know that some of the younger men are chafing at the bit, growing frustrated by our lack of action. Don't you see? This is our chance to give them an important mission, something worthwhile to do, and at the same time we can repay you for some of your many sacrifices to the cause."

Leia's skin turned to ice. "A rescue attempt?"

Willard and Paruna exchanged frowns. "But of course," said Paruna. "What else would we be talking about?"

Leia jumped to her feet, her chair crashing to the floor as she shoved it back. "I don't believe this! Do you know what security's like in Llanderol Prison under normal circumstances? And you expect to get a task force in there during a prisoner transfer?" She'd wanted

to rescue Chalil herself, once. Before Han Solo had sat her down to carefully detail some little known facts about surveillance and troop deployment at the 'moderate' security facility of Llanderol.

Liwan made vaguely reassuring noises. "The plan has been carefully set up, Princess. From the information our agent sent us, it's fool-proof."

Leia's lips tightened over her anger as she remembered one of Han's favorite sayings: *Nothing's fool-proof, Your Worship; fools have too much ingenuity.* Her council seemed bent on proving him right. And yet. . .

"And what does little Leia want? The sun and the stars? Or a seat in the Senate?"

"And what does little Leia want? . . . want? . . . want?"

Damn him! Leia was unsure if she damned Chalil for being arrested as a traitor, or Han for showing her how impossible a rescue attempt would be. *Damn him!*

She drew a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Hating herself for what she did, and the Council for forcing her to do it, Leia outlined the impossibilities of Chalil's rescue.

*

Fighting his way out of blackness, Han hauled himself to his feet, then slumped against the rough-hewn wall of the abandoned portside cantina. He blinked several times to focus his eyes, then checked his chronometer. Past 0200. Morning was still hours away, but with luck he'd find a hiding spot in the night's shadows before then. The *Falcon* had flown. *"If I'm not back by 2400 hours, hightail it back to Corador. . ."* He'd given Chewbacca the order, and the wookiee would have obeyed.

Han scratched his day-old beard, planned his next move. This part of Old Town was on the edge of the port. Beyond the row of gutted buildings, the sky glowed as though afire. Cinninnatus Port never darkened: thirty hours a day, high intensity lighting mercilessly revealed every flaw, every lurker in the shadows. And Jabba owned the space-port. If not by right, then most definitely by might.

Han drew a deep breath, winced as a sharp pain lanced through him. Every breath put him that much closer to passing out for the last time, but he was still alive--a fact he'd not have taken book on last night. Now he had to make the most of it.

Absently, he rubbed his fingers along the edge of the sling he'd fashioned from his shirt. Weakened as he was, he'd not be able to draw on the mental reserves necessary to enter a time-freeze state. He'd have to shoot on the drop--left-handedly--and pray Morga he made his mark.

But such thoughts paid no piper. It was time and more he was on his way. Jabba's territory or not, the spaceport offered him his only chance. He knew the layout and the territory, knew many of the regular merchants and traders, knew the routines. If he could stow away, or find shelter, or make an Alliance contact before the Gank's mates located him. . .

The wind iced through the old ruins, chilling him to the quick. The shadows flickered with every noise, with every stirring of-- There! Was that shadow swelling, growing, showing a vaguely humanoid outline? Han tensed, adrenalin pumping, and reached for his blaster. The wind died down and the shadow no longer threatened.

Han rubbed his burning eyes; they felt as though crovods were tearing them out, and he not yet cold meat. His head pounded in time to his racing heart and his body felt on fire. Only his useless

right arm was free of pain. Han stepped forward and swayed dizzily. Clinging to the walls and shadows, he hobbled toward the lights of Cinninnatus Port.

*

Leia flicked off the view-screen with an angry, stabbing motion. Old articles about Chalil only frustrated her. Damn them. Damn them all. She'd plastered over her emotions dealing with Alderaan and her family. Now her careful repair work was chipping off, and no one was around to help her shore it up again.

And damn you, Solo, never around when I need you.

The lie didn't help. She knew why Han had stayed so long with the Alliance, risking all. For Luke, for her. She was more than selfish to want him to stay, when staying increased his daily danger. It was criminal to bind him by the chains he himself had forged, all unaware.

But damn you, Solo, if--when you come back, don't you ever try this trick again. Next time there'll be no next time.

She paced from workarea to living-space and back again, but her cramped quarters offered no escape for her seething emotions. Images from her childhood crowded into her mind, and time and again the central figure was Chalil. Chalil of the laughing blue eyes and the silver hair. Chalil, her favorite brother. *Chalil. . .*

She paused, stretched to relieve the tension in her neck and back. Was there any hope to her generals' plan? She picked up the cassette she'd taken from Dodonna and slapped it thoughtfully against her palm. Her face hardened and she strode to the table shoved against the far wall. Setting the rescue tape on top of the console, she waved on the

work lights, then palmed on the computer terminal. She gave her access code and demanded a direct, scrambled line to Computer Central.

"Working." As always, the impersonal monotone irritated her, but she had never had the free time to reprogram it to something more pleasant.

"I have a new tape relating to L'angerol Prison. Has an order gone through to purge all old information?" She was not sure why she asked. Curiosity, perhaps, or, more likely, a naturally cautious nature made even more careful by the exigencies of war.

"Negative." The answer did not surprise her. Bureaucratic red-tape, even on an Alliance base, would naturally delay the records department from erasing old data. She wondered what changes might be reflected.

"Pull available information, high-lighting floor plans and security details."

The computer hummed to itself. With a smug plop, it ejected a cassette. Picking up the cassette, Leia weighed it doubtfully. It was small to contain the information she'd requested.

Shrugging, Leia fed the cassette into the access panel. She cleared her mind of all distractions and sat in front of the read-out screen, letting the information unroll before her eyes. *Guard stations, emplacements, weapons deployment. Staff quarters, interrogation rooms, cells.*

The tape ran out and Leia stared at the blank screen for several seconds. Discrepancies were obvious between this information and the information fed to her generals by intelligence sources. Why? Such discrepancies cost lives. What caused them? Faulty intelligence? Deliberate planting of false information? And by whom?

She didn't know enough. Not to make a rational decision.

She clicked the rescue tape into place. "Is it feasible to mount a rescue operation such as outlined here?"

"This information does not compute with earlier figures. Erase existing data and substitute?"

Leia hesitated. Where was the lie? Lost in thought, she dialed a cup of jahwe from the wall dispenser; when it was delivered she held it cupped in her hands. Its warmth soothed her. "No, put conflicting information on hold. How does that affect the information I requested?"

"Insufficient data."

She sipped the scalding stimulant, then blew on it to cool it down. She'd expected some such answer. "If the information in your memory banks is correct, can this rescue succeed?"

"Negative."

"And if the information I gave you is correct?"

"Negative."

So short an answer to spell doom for her brother. She drew a ragged breath and, with exaggerated care, set her cup down on the table. Hugging her distress to herself, she walked blindly to the other end of the room. "There's no way to rescue Chalil, then," she said, despair heavy in her voice. The computer, literal as always, responded.

"Insufficient data."

The monotone voice broke through her sorrow and she spun angrily. Then, aware of the futility of yelling at the machine, Leia bit back a denunciation. She stalked to the console and slammed off the vocoder. She had no need for the computer's supercilious comments at a time like this.

She resumed her pacing. Bitter, guilt-tinged grief twisted her thoughts.

Chalil would have been perfectly happy being the very model of a conscientious crown-prince--had she not laughed him into treason. Chalil. So close, yet so far. Was there nothing she could do to rescue him, to bring him back to freedom, to light? Nothing at all?

She stopped short, turned slowly to face the computer. No. She would not surrender so easily. Somehow, somewhere, she would find a plan with at least a marginal chance of success, even if-- She grinned wryly. Straightening purposefully, she strode to the computer and reactivated it. She'd find her rescue plan even if she had to send in a full symphony orchestra, a troupe of traveling players, a five-tier circus, and a youth-scout patrol for cover. *Well, maybe not the scouts*, she amended, fingers flying over the computer panel as she tried permutation after permutation.

And ComCen would help her narrow down the odds. The computer might be tightmouthed as a Sith overlord, and have the soul and the manners of an Imperial lackey, but it would not get the better of her.

Leia felt revitalized, alive once more. She patted the console almost affectionately. Something to do! Fingers dancing as she fed in another set of computations, she made a mental note to stop after a bit to dial up a gallon of jahwe. This promised to be a long session.

"All right, that plan's useless. What if we--"

*

Han tried to melt into the shadows. Failing that, he tried to press his body as flat as a drylander's pancake against the side of the hotel overlooking the spaceport. Exposing as little of himself as possible, he peered around the corner and studied the guarded gate leading to Cinninnatus Port.

The forcefield fence surrounding the spaceport showed no weaknesses, no gaps. He had to go through the gate. But bruised, wounded, and dirty as he was, he'd be stopped and searched the minute he tried to step inside; he looked damn suspicious for a sales rep of the Parnell Combine, coming back through the gate shirtless, arm in a hastily torn sling, clothes and body bearing the signs of his several close brushes with death.

And the *Falcon* had already flown. Any trooper who didn't question him was grease for the ion tube.

"Dum-dum-dum, da-da-dum, da-da-dum . . . and come what may, the Inquisitor's lot is not a happy one!"

The oiska-soaked baritone, raised in one of the popular songs making the rounds of the cantinas, brought Han to full alert. Not daring to breathe, he flattened himself still further into the wall and looked back down the alleyway.

A spacer, rolling home to his ship after hitting every dive in Old Town. Relief coursed through Han so headily he almost passed out. Soundlessly, he drew his blaster from his belt. He thumbed the weapon to stun, aimed it carefully at the staggering singer. Concentric circles of blue energy enveloped the drunk, and he folded in mid-song.

Han waited several seconds, making sure the man was unaccompanied and unfollowed, then scuttled over to him. Shoving the blaster back into his belt, he knelt at his victim's side. He felt for pulse-points, checked breathing and eye movement. The drunk was unhurt and would wake with no more than a very bad hangover. Meantime--Han eyed the man measuringly--his clothes would gain him entrance to possible safety.

Han stumbled to his feet. Bending, he grabbed one of the spacer's hands and dragged him from the middle of the



narrow alleyway to prop him against the shadowed wall of the portside hotel.

Han stripped the ship off the stunned spacer. He cleaned himself as well as he could, then eased his injured arm into the sleeve of the 'borrowed' shirt; he dragged the shirt on over the rest of him, buttoned up. Biting his lips over the pain, he tucked his injured arm back into his makeshift sling.

He looked ruefully at the spacer he'd just stunned, then shrugged. This was an emergency; he had to get into port. Han stepped over his slumbering victim and headed for the main gate.

The sergeant on duty at the gate held out his hand for Han's ID. As nonchalantly as possible, when every movement sent spasms of pain aching through him, Han tossed over the card. The sergeant scarcely looked at it. He nodded toward the sling. "Fight?"

The two recruits standing behind the sergeant stiffened; slowly, almost imperceptibly, they brought their power-rifles to bear on Han. His mouth dry, his throat feeling as though it had been cut three weeks ago, he smiled through lips that felt cardboard stiff and shrugged his uninjured shoulder.

"This?" he asked, striving for lightness in his voice. "No, just an old injury I reopened tonight with some--" He deliberately injected a lascivious note into his comment, "--some overly enthusiastic calisthenics."

The sergeant glanced at the ID card and hesitated. Han held his breath. Finally the armored squad-leader nodded and handed back the ID. "Be careful next time," he warned. "These portside doxies can be a bit much for a man."

Han pocketed the card. "Thanks for

the advice, sergeant, I'll remember that the next time I'm in port." Han nodded and strolled through the gate. Once out of sight of the guards he slumped against a nearby retaining wall. Sweat beaded his brow and it was difficult to breathe.

Find shelter. That was most important. Shelter, medical treatment, and some way to get out of here, out of Cinninnatus Port, off Dardanel. He had to get-- The images of Leia and of Luke sprang into his mind. He had to get home.

Han pushed away from the wall, hobbled down one of the aisles between parked and locked ships. Mangar. That shift wheeler-dealer owed him one. Deliberately, Han pushed down the wisp of memory reminding him that Mangar had refused help before when Han was on the run from Jabba the Hut.

Han paused to get his bearings. Pain made it difficult to concentrate. The *Falcon* had been parked two more aisles down, so Mangar's offices would be--

"Ssss-sss."

The hiss was low, scarcely within hearing range, but Han's neck prickled and every hair on his body seemed suddenly charged with electric life of its own. He turned his head to look down the way he had just come. An armed Gank blocked the aisle.

A slight sound from the other end of the passageway caught his attention. Knowing what he would see, Han slowly faced front. A second Gank, also armed, loomed into sight. Trapped. Trapped like a moth in a flame-jar. The hunting hiss of the first Gank sounded again. The Gank he faced tightened her finger on her blaster's trigger. Without conscious thought, Han dropped to the ground, jarring every bone in his body and almost blacking out. Twin beams of deadly light flashed over his head.

Gritting his teeth against the reality of the pain, Han rolled over and pushed

himself into a half-sitting position, pulling his blaster free as he did so. The first Gank was down, burned by her partner. The second, faster, had ducked, and was injured only on the arm in the cross-fire. She shook her head, as though clearing it of pain.

Han tried to raise his weapon and discovered his hand shook too much. With dreadful clarity he realized he had no defense. The Gank's lips were pulled back in the grim rictus that passed for a smile among her kind. "You will be a superb prize, Solo. You are worthy even without the assassin's price."

"I'm not dead yet." But with sickening foresight, Han knew he was. His body refused to cooperate; he couldn't life his blaster to firing level. The Gank smiled once more and offered him a small salute with her weapon. Her finger tightened on the trigger. Han tried to scabble backward, out of her range. She panned her weapon with him and her finger tightened further.

There was a sharp hum, and an energy bolt burned past Han's cheeks. He smelled the corrosive stench of burned flesh and braced himself for pain and numbing death. The Gank folded in on herself and dropped to the ground. Blinking in surprise, Han realized he was still alive.

Wondering what he now faced, Han peered over his shoulder into the shadows at the head of the aisle. A bounty jumper after Jabba's reward? It had been known to happen. He tried once more to lift his blaster to ward off this new and unknown danger; exhaustion and pain defeated him, and the weapon fell to the ground.

Reloading its bowcaster, a tall, shaggy figure stepped over the first Gank. Han let his breath go with a swoosh. He slumped down, supporting himself on his good hand, and glared at the wookiee. "I suppose you think it's funny, scaring me to death like that?" He was almost drunk from relief.

Chewbacca shrugged and blinked non-committally.

"Damn you, Chewie, you were supposed to hightail it out of here eight hours ago." Chewbacca whuffed in response, but over the sudden roaring in his ears Han could not make out the words. Everything turned black as he fell forward.

*

Luke woke with a start as the bedroom door slammed open. Before he could rub the sleep from his eyes or grab for the robe at the foot of the bed, he was yanked to his feet and hustled out the door, an armored stormtrooper firmly grasping each arm.

Luke's stomach pitched and he forced it to still. He remembered the horror that remained of the Lars householding after an Imperial visit, remembered the atrocity tales he'd heard from some of the other pilots and technicians at the base. *Oh dear mother! Let the troopers not be here because of me!* Bile clogged his throat at the thought of this house, so welcoming, smoldering in the aftermath of Imperial anger.

Something crashed behind him. He twisted out of his captors' hold and tried to identify the sound. *Mila?* "Move, skriv!" growled the stormtrooper to his right, shoving him toward the stairs with his rifle butt.

Luke stumbled and barely kept from falling down the stairs by catching onto the rail. A rough hand shoved him into the main hall. Mila and her parents, still in their sleeping robes, were already there, herded together by two stormtroopers. Mila glanced up, saw Luke, and gave a watery smile.

He stepped toward her and one of his guards hauled him back. Some of his shock and fear melted. Luke glared at the trooper and shook him off.

The stormtrooper raised his weapon and Luke stiffened. He panicked, wondering if he had blown the mission. Fear heightened his senses, priming him for slight or for attack. Under the close watch of four armed stormtroopers, he could do neither. Trying to calm himself, he took a deep breath. His racing pulse slowed. Stubbornly, he set his mouth to hide its quivering.

One of the troopers guarding Mila's family shook his head warningly at the trooper facing Luke. To Luke's surprise, his antagonist backed down and lowered his rifle. Luke's eyes narrowed. So. They did not want a confrontation. Not yet, at any rate. Filing that bit of information, Luke crossed to Mila. "You all right?"

She nodded. Shivering in her thin nightdress, she pulled her shawl closer. She started to say something; a stir in the outer hallway interrupted her. Two more stormtroopers appeared. They propelled Torbett into the room, then took up positions near the door with the two troopers who had brought Luke downstairs.

Glaring at the white-shelled troopers and wiping blood from his lips, Torbett crossed to the others. Luke cut glances with him, nodded in recognition of their need to protect each other.

Luke turned to Coven Hadaway. "Sir? This--" He stopped, at a loss for words, and gestured angrily at the stormtroopers. "This outrage! What's wrong? Have you-- have we done something?"

Coven Hadaway gripped Luke's shoulder. Luke caught an image of troopers breaking like so many plastic dolls. The dark-skinned man eyed Luke grimly. "You an Outlander, Larens?" Luke nodded. Tatooine was one of the most distant of the Rim worlds.

"I thought so. Those are the only worlds with any freedom left. Their people have enough trouble just staying alive." Coven nodded toward the troopers

flanking fireplace and door. "On the MidWorlds, such 'outrages' are everyday events." He smiled, and it was an expression totally incongruous on the open face of the man Luke had met, and grown to like, earlier that evening. "Our most esteemed governor keeps strict surveillance on his subjects."

Torbett fingered his still bleeding lip gingerly. "And they're not always that careful about how they keep tabs on you."

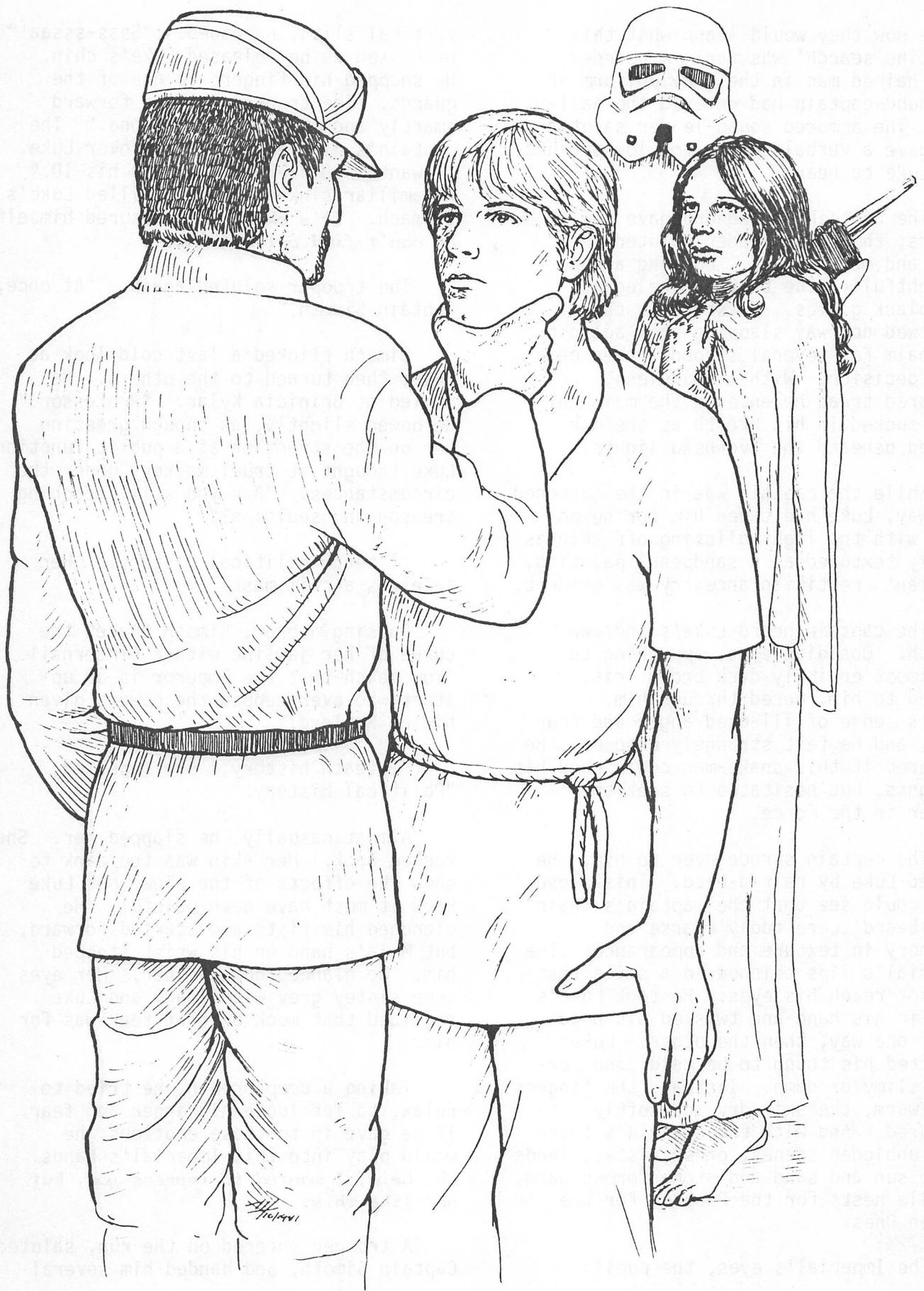
Coven forced his son's head up. "Troopers?" His quiet voice prickled Luke's spine.

Torbett shook his head. "Only indirectly. I tried to get away from one of them and slammed into a door."

Luke felt out of his depth. "You're all so, so calm about this! This happens all the time and you--" He swallowed his protest and stared at Torbett, realizing why the younger man had said he had to join the Alliance. Suddenly Luke felt like a play rebel, drawn into affairs above his head by the dream image of a beautiful princess. The deaths of his aunt and uncle had been swift, unexpected, unbelievable--and, despite his brave words to Biggs Darklighter at Tosche Station, his only real exposure to Imperial 'justice'. The destruction of Alderaan had been completely beyond his understanding: an entire world destroyed for one man's pride.

But this. This was real, and understandable, and very, very here. He would be shaking still if he weren't too stubborn to let the stormtroopers see his fear. *And damn it, what the HELL am I doing philosophizing at three o'clock in the morning when I'm being held at bay by a squad of stormtroopers?* He looked around wildly. Surely there was some way out of this?

"Report, Squad-leader." The voice was low, slightly accented, and compelling. Luke spun to face the open door.



Maybe now they would learn what this 'routine search' was for! A bearded, dark-haired man in the grey uniform of a ground-captain had entered the hallway. The armored squad-leader saluted and gave a verbal report too low-pitched for Luke to hear.

The captain nodded and gave new orders; the squad-leader saluted once more and marched off. Looking around thoughtfully, the captain peeled off his black gloves. He stood in the shadowed doorway slapping them against his palm for several seconds, then came to a decision. With a soundless, measured tread he entered the main hall. Luke sucked in his breath as the man passed beneath the overhead lights.

While the captain was in the darkened hallway, Luke had taken him for human. Now, with the light glinting off skin as subtly textured as a sandpearl painting, the man's reptilian ancestry was evident.

The captain heard Luke's indrawn breath. Obsidian eyes, appearing to be almost entirely dark brown iris, turned to him, bored through him. Luke's sense of ill-used anger and fear grew, and he felt strangely exposed. He wondered if this snake-man could read his thoughts, but hesitated to seek the answer in the Force.

The captain strode over to him. He topped Luke by half-a-head. This close, Luke could see that the captain's 'hair' and 'beard' were oddly coarse and feathery in texture and appearance. The Imperial's lips thinned in a smile that did not reach his eyes. He took Luke's chin in his hand and twisted his head first one way, then the other. Luke expected his touch to be cold, and perhaps slimy or damp. Instead, the fingers were warm, the skin dry and softly textured. And with the captain's touch came unbidden scenes, other vistas, lands where sun and sand and stone formed warm, fertile nests for the People, for the Chosen Ones.

The Imperial's eyes, the pupils

vertical slits, narrowed. "Ssss-ssaa!" he hissed as he released Luke's chin. He snapped his fingers to one of the guards. The trooper stepped forward smartly and saluted. "This one." The captain's glance slid coldly over Luke. "I want a complete rundown on his ID." A familiar sinking feeling filled Luke's stomach. *It's okay*, he reassured himself, *he can't find out a thing.*

The trooper saluted again. "At once, Captain Simoth."

Simoth flicked a last cold look at Luke, then turned to the others. He smiled at Brinicia Kylar. "Professor." He bowed slightly, as though greeting her on the street or at a public function. Luke thought it cruel mockery under the circumstances. "Are you still teaching treason and sedition?"

"I teach political history." Her face was a calm mask.

Raising a brow, Simoth traced the curve of her jawline with a fingernail. "You teach that the Emperor is an upstart who overstepped the powers given him as Warlord."

"I teach history," she repeated. "Political history."

Almost casually, he slapped her. She rocked back. Her skin was too dark to show the effects of the blow, but Luke knew it must have been painful. He clenched his fists and started forward, but Mila's hand on his wrist stopped him. He glanced down at her. Her eyes were slatey grey with fear, and Luke realized that much of that fear was for him.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to relax, to let loose his anger and fear. If he gave in to those emotions, he would play into this Imperial's hands. *Oh, Leia, I wanted to impress you, but not like this.*

A trooper entered on the run, saluted Captain Simoth, and handed him several

printout sheets. The captain examined the papers carefully, then studied Luke. The young man felt strangely chilled as the Imperial's icy stare pinned him to the wall.

"Your papers are in order, for now." Simoth rolled the flimsy sheets tightly. "I would advise you not to leave Andrasar until I can run a more thorough check on you, however." Almost to himself he said, "There's something there. . . ." He fingered his seeming beard, and Luke watched in fascination as the strands of 'hair' moved of their own accord.

Simoth snapped out of his reverie. "Enough." He turned to Brinicia Kylar. "Professor, you condemn yourself with every lecture you give. I will bide my time, however, to see what else I trap in my net." He glanced at Torbett, Mila. "Just remember, Duara, that your eggings may be caught in my coils as well."

He motioned to the guards, and they quick-filed out of the room. Simoth started to follow. At the door, the captain turned and stared Luke full in the face. Again Luke felt the warmth of a full and glorious sun overhead, of fine-grained amethyst and rose sand beneath his bare feet. "And you, my dear Duar Olmes, you I will most definitely meet again."

Simoth strode from the room, from the house. The front door irised shut behind him. Luke slumped against the nearest wall. "I never want to go through another night like this. Who does he--"

Coven Hadaway held up a cautioning hand. Soundlessly, he walked to the far wall and pressed one of the ornamental extrusions on a piece of modernistic sculpture standing there. An antenna popped out, scanned the room. There was a short series of beeps, then the antenna disappeared again. Coven relaxed and smiled.

"It's all right," he said. "There're

no transmitters or spy-eyes this time."

"This time?" Luke yelped. "You mean he--"

Brinicia Kylar nodded in weary resignation. "Oh, yes," she said, and her voice was the closest to bitter that Luke had yet heard it. "We are very old acquaintances."

Anger surged through Luke. "But, but that makes it even worse. He played with you, like--like a catron with a mindrial. Of all the rotten, inhuman--"

Brinicia Kylar reached across to him. Concern and worry were clearly evident through her touch, but strangely, they seemed to be for him, for his attitude. Brow creased, he put his hand over hers. "Duara?"

"Larens--" She hesitated, as though unsure of how to piece the words together. Coven Hadaway came over to her. Standing behind her, he put his hands on her shoulders. She leaned back against him, seeming to draw strength from his body. "Simoth is unhuman, not inhuman. We cannot expect him to act as we do. He is an Imperial soldier whose job is ferreting out traitors. His raids are not made randomly or for pleasure."

"So we should be grateful he comes here for a reason?"

Coven Hadaway picked up the thread of conversation. "Yes," he said baldly. "Everyday I thank Morga-Rising that now we deal with Captain Simoth, and not his predecessor. So do not think to judge us."

Feeling uncomfortable under their disapproval, Luke looked away. Brinicia put a hand to his cheek. "Larens, remember, a man is no less a man because he wears an Imperial uniform or because he is not human. Forget that and the Alliance is lost."

Luke turned back to her. "How can

you be so, so understanding about this? He hit you. His men yanked us out of bed and then he played with you and he hit you."

"And that's all he did," she said.

"Isn't that enough?" Luke could not understand her calm acceptance.

"Larens, he only does his duty. I am under suspicion as a rebel sympathizer."

Luke set his jaw stubbornly. "That's no reason to--"

"You don't understand, young one," said Coven. "He does only his duty."

Brinicia nodded. "Simoth is fair, Larens. He doesn't use his position as an excuse for extortion or torture." Mila shivered and Torbett put an arm about her. "I remember the last commandant. He--he was the most corrupt, evil man I've ever known. And the men under him were little better than space-scum." Brinicia Kylar looked at her children; her eyes were empty. "Do you still not understand? Captain Simoth does his duty. And that is all he does. He finds no joy in putting suspects to the question before evidence of their guilt has been collected." All life, all animation died from her face. "Or in raping children in front of their parents."

Luke stared at Mila. She stared back, then sought and clasped Torbett's hand. Brother and sister stiffened. Luke looked back to Brinicia. His voice was as flat as hers. "Captain Simoth is part of the Empire. As long as he serves it, he gives his support to animals like that," he said stubbornly.

Coven nodded. "And so, some day that honest, conscientious, loyal Imperial will kill me. Or I'll kill him." His voice was gentle, implacable.

"Someday, never," Luke said in disgust. "Why don't you fight them? You could organize the people and--"

"--and you sound like a stupid Liberation Front pamphlet," Torbett said. "There're more ways to fight than by fighting." The skin grew taut over his cheekbones. "Simoth was right, Larens. My mother does teach sedition. How many persons do you think she's won over for the Alliance? She--"

Coven touched Torbett lightly on the shoulder, then held Luke's gaze for a long minute. "Sedition doesn't mean stupid. Don't underestimate your enemy."

Brinicia drew a deep breath. "As we told you, Larens, at least Simoth isn't the old commandant. We can deal with a loyal Imperial." She clasped her husband's hand tightly, as though for comfort. "But we can speak of these things later this morning." With a weary, patient sight she gathered together her family. "Larens? To bed."

He nodded. "In a minute. I--I want to unwind a bit, first." She reached out to him again.

"Larens, it is all right." He touched her hand.

"I--yes, thank you, I'll--I'll remember." Brinicia stared at him, then nodded. Goodnights were exchanged, and the family left the room. Bemused, Luke sank onto a chair. Before his entrance into the Alliance forces, he had had no more than cursory exposure to Imperial officers or leaders and, because of the isolated nature of the Lars householding, had been exposed to no aliens other than Jawas and Sandpeople. This snake-man, this Imperial captain whose praises Brinicia and Coven seemed so intent on singing, unsettled him.

Luke remembered the heat of a sun that did not shine over Tatooine and shuddered.

*

Pain insinuated itself into Han's consciousness. He forced his eyes open. Chewbacca was leaning over him, strapping him into bed. "Where-- What--"

A deep growl told him to hush, to stop his fussing, to go back to sleep.

"Right. My body feels like a Gank's flayed me alive, my head like a maracor's used it for stomping practice, and my arm like it's not even there anymore, and you want me to go to sleep?" He shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position on the bunk. He couldn't. Chewbacca had immobilized his right arm in a bacta-cast which kept getting in his way.

Han directed a dirty look at the cast. He knew the bacta solution would heal his arm by the time they docked at Corador, but that did not make it comfortable now. He glared at the wookiee. "Why are you here, anyway? I told you to take off if I wasn't back by 2400 hours."

Chewbacca looked as innocent as only a very guilty wookiee can look. Lifting Han's head from the pillow, he forced the Corellian to drain a cup of ruby liquid. The particularly bitter taste told Han it was qa'aiavar, a potent narcotic. "Hooriaariooliaaurgh?" Chewbacca glanced at the chronometer on the wall and shrugged.

Puzzled, Han peered at the chrono. He had to squint, because the image had an annoying habit of doubling oddly. A reluctant grin lit his face. The timepiece had been stopped at 2390. "Okay, fuzzball, you win," he said as darkness claimed him once more.

*

Y65M1D36Hr0900-1 70ST

Leia set the cassette on top of

the console with trembling fingers. Now she had proof that her midnight battle with the computer was justified. Savoring the victory, she stretched muscles cramped from hours of disuse, then strode to the fresher facilities. With a quick glance at her chrono, she saw she would barely make the council meeting Dodonna had called for the morning.

She shook down her hair, delighting in the feel of it against her neck, and palmed on the sonics. She turned slowly, luxuriating as the long night's dirt and aggravation sloughed off. But she could not long ignore her problems. Dodonna's meeting must be faced, but more important, she had to decide who to trust with her mission.

Stepping from the sano, she padded back to the computer console. Palming on the terminal, she said, "Computer, on a scale of one to ten, call me up a list of everyone on base with a ten score for the following credentials: general pilot's license, experience with small arms and with ship's arms, unarmed combat training, intelligence retrieval experience, espionage and sabotage skills, verifiable secondary ID, adaptability and capability of functioning without direct orders, intelligence network contacts, and proven ability under fire."

"Working." Within seconds, the print-out screen flickered to life, but no names appeared there. Leia shrugged. She had not expected to find such a paragon on Corador.

"All right," she said, "call me up the names of anyone assigned to this base with no less than an eight score in any two categories, a ten score in all remaining categories." Two names formed on the screen. "Cari Fourmoons?" she read off the first name.

For the first time since she had had access to it, the computer sounded apologetic. "Deceased," it said. "Commander Fourmoons was a casualty in our

last fleet engagement, but her name has not yet been expunged from my data banks."

Impatiently, Leia tapped her fingers against the side of the computer. "Expunge it," she ordered. She went on to the second name. "Forris Morkander? Is he dead, too?"

"Negative."

Breathing a sigh of relief, she ordered Morkander to her quarters.

"Morkander has been on an off-planet, covert mission for the past two months."

Tired of the computer's warped sense of humor, Leia clenched and unclenched her fists as she said, "Eliminating all deceased and absent persons assigned to this base, call me up the names of anyone with at least a nine score in six of the required categories; scores in the remaining categories must be no less than seven."

The screen brightened. The list was small, no more than fifteen names. Leia frowned. Surely a major military base could offer more potential agents than that? Punching first the enlarge button, then the freeze-frame toggle, she conned the list.

Her stomach recoiled with pain as fiercely throbbing as dindalyr poison when she came to the last name on the read-out.

Leia Organa.

She stared at the list, but her name did not disappear. Brow furrowed with thought she compared her efficiency ratings with the scores of the others listed, then she tapped the 'off' button on the computer. She walked to her closet. Without conscious thought, she dressed in the first things that came to hand. She left her quarters, walked blindly toward the council room.

Dodonna would never give permission. . .

Several hours later, Leia leaned wearily against the door to her quarters and hoped none of her fellow council members had been aware of her inattention--or its cause. She straightened her shoulders, firmed her chin. It did not matter; the time had come to act.

Muttering an impatient Corellian curse she had picked up from one of the junior mechs--much to Han Solo's dismay--Leia dug frantically through her belongings for the Special Police ID Han had made for her aborted mission to Iken. Unearthing it, she checked it over carefully. It appeared in order, and the rank Han had arranged for her was high enough to get her into L1angerol.

She smiled wryly. Getting in would be easy. As Han always said, it was the getting out that was hard. But if, as Computer Central assured her, the best chance to rescue Chalil was to send in one person--a covert mission rather than a task force operation--it was only fitting that she be the one to risk her life.

She had not been able to prevent the death of Alderaan. Had, by her way of thinking, been the cause of that death. Chalil was her brother. She would not--could not--risk anyone else for what was clearly her duty.

Four years is long enough to rot in an Imperial prison, Chalil. I'll get you out, I promise.

Pulling out an old flight suit, she dragged it on, then tucked her hair into a flight-helmet. She smiled at the business-like image reflected in the mirror and picked up the small package the quartermaster had delivered while she was at the meeting. It contained the uniform she needed to match her fake ID. Leia nodded in satisfaction. Had she forgotten anything?

Damn. Dodonna, just in case.

Lips firmed against even the idea of

failure now that she was committed to Chalil's rescue, Leia dictated a holotape to be delivered to Dodonna early the next morning. With such a head start, she'd not be followed and returned to the base like an erring child.

She waved out the lights and locked the door to her quarters. She would not think such defeatist thoughts. This was her best--her only chance to rescue Chalil and she would take it. Han, if he were here, would be the first to agree, the first to volunteer.

The first to insist she stay home.

Leia shrugged that thought aside. She had the training, the experience, the identification, the purpose. She was the only logical candidate. She would not, could not fail. She'd pull off the rescue and be back to Corador Base before Han returned from Cinninnatus Port. If he ever did return.

Cutting with sure steps through the warren of corridors, Leia rehearsed her plan: she'd slip out of Corador, get clearance to land on Llanderol, rescue Chalil, and be back before there was any danger. Of course, it'd not be that easy, but Han always said to keep plans as simple as possible in case of last minute foul-ups. And she could always pray.

She entered the underground hangar. It was empty, echoing in the darkness. The sharp aroma of fuel fought with the musty smell of oil. Leia threaded her way through the ranks of small fighting craft to the snub-nosed scout she had selected for her mission. She patted its side. *It's up to us, girl. Our men folks are all off playing.*

She clambered into the pilot's seat and kicked over the engine. Adjusting the earjack, she said, "Control, this is the Princess Organa. We've been having trouble with one of the scouts. I'm taking it on a short hop to test the repairs. Make sure I have a clear flight path."

"Copy, Princess. No incoming ships. You are cleared for take off."

"Copy, over and out." Leia smiled as she broke communication. At least it had begun easily enough. And now. . .

Next stop, Llanderol!

part 2

Y65M1D36Hr1000-2650ST

Tapping his fingers against the air-car's steering wheel, Luke narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and stared at the gates leading to Andrasar Spaceport. "I know it's got nothing to do with us, Tor, I still don't like it." He shook his head in mingled exasperation and disbelief. "Of all the flukes. . ."

Torbett shrugged. "So? Paruna gave us an extra day for 'complications', and if this isn't that," he gestured to the cordoned-off field, "I don't know what it is."

Luke punched the steering wheel. "It's the timing. Why now?" Such coincidences--Han would probably chalk them up to luck--bothered him.

"You heard that trooper. 'In honor of the governor's birthday celebration'," Torbett paused, then said excitedly, "Hey! If we're stuck here for the duration, we can pick up Mila and go to the tourney."

Luke stared at the younger man in disbelief. "How can you even think of such a thing after last night? 'Sides, we have to get back to base."

Torbett cast him a look of amused

irritation. "How? Should we steal a spaceship?" He leaned toward Luke. "Look, all ships are grounded, the port is closed, there'll be nothing in or out during the Grand Parade, and we're stuck in the middle. So I say, let's relax and enjoy it." He paused, then added coaxingly, "We're already under suspicion. It'll help out cover story if we act normal. And normal means going to the parade."

Luke shook his head. "Captain Simoth--"

"Oh, Stralm! Are you on that kick again? Simoth doesn't run planet-operations, you know. He's a captain, and he follows orders. This isn't a blood-vendetta between you and him. Didn't you listen to my folks this morning?" Torbett sighed deeply. With weary resignation, he added, "Look, it'd be the governor's birthday if we were here or not, right?" Luke nodded. "And the governor didn't know we'd drop by for his party, right?" Luke flicked Torbett a harassed look and nodded again. "And the mission's a success, right?" Torbett persisted.

"So far," Luke agreed. "But Han says--"

"For the love of the All," Torbett exclaimed, "the man's a common smuggler, not the author of the *Book of Wisdom of the Elders*!"

Despite his unease, Luke grinned. "Sweet Mother, no!" Luke knew Han thought all Jedi knowledge useless, and the superstitions in the *Book of the Elders* more so than most. "But you know what'll happen to us if we get caught with that tape."

"Which might be sooner than you think, if we don't get a move on." Torbett eyed the spaceport gate warily. "Those troopers are looking this way. If they wonder why we're interested in a closed-off field, we're in trouble."

Luke glanced at the squad stationed

around the port perimeters. Torbett was right. Stuck on Kasulur until the end of the festivities, they had better act like two students given a reprieve. "*Act natural, Luke, like you're supposed to be where you are, and no one'll doubt your act,*" Han had advised him on more than one occasion. "*Act shift, and wear a sign that says 'I am a Spy', and you'll be hauled into the authorities before you can sneeze twice.*"

Luke edged his aircar around an Imperial Services staff car approaching the gates. Han's advice had been right before. Now Luke would put it to the acid test. As he passed the troopers at the checkpoint, he raised his voice slightly. "Just think, Tor, another day's vacation and the Old Man can't say a thing about it."

Torbett agreed loudly. Luke knew their cover IDs had been accepted when the troopers burst into laughter and the non-com casually waved them on.

Despite this, Luke drove carefully, glancing over his shoulder as he turned the corner. Captain Simoth stood next to the staff car that had just pulled up to the gate. For one interminable second he stared directly into Luke's eyes. Although there was no breeze, Luke shivered.

Facing forward quickly, he guided the aircar onto the main highway and headed back to Andrasar.

Stopping only to pick up Mila, Luke headed for the parade route. They dropped the rented aircar off, then walked the rest of the way. The crowds grew larger and more spirited as they neared the festival area, and Luke feared he would be separated from Mila and Torbett. Wondering half-defiantly if he should feel unfaithful to Leia, Luke reached over to clasp Mila's hand. She returned the pressure of his fingers and flashed him a brilliant smile.

Feeling daring, and not a little bold, Luke pulled her closer and put an arm around her shoulders. Then he looked for Torbett, spotting him about five meters on. "Tor! Torbett!"

Angling around to face them, Torbett elbowed a beetle-browed Dolaanian ship's captain in the lower stomach. Luke and Mila exchanged grins as Torbett apologized to the alien, then edged away carefully. Torbett let the press of the crowd carry him along and turned his head again. "Larens?"

Luke pointed to a narrow, empty alleyway off to one side. "Let's get out of this crowd and catch our breath, okay?" After the sparsely settled, widely scattered farm communities of Tatooine, Andrasar at festival was unnerving.

Torbett nodded and inched his way through the crowd to the alleyway. Squeezing by a cream-furred wookiee in the deep red uniform of the Special Police, Luke and Mila also pushed through to the byway. Luke slumped against the wall abutting the narrow cut-through and glanced back at the crowd. He hated to appear provincial, but could not help gawking. Shoulder-to-wing and cheek-by-jowl, members of more races than he had ever heard of jostled for positions from which to see the parade. Even Cinnacinnatus paled in comparison.

The crowd stirred, and the brassy sounds of a marching band neared. "We'll never see in this crowd," Torbett protested.

Mila glanced around, shrugged. "There's no place else to go. Some of these people camped here all night for a decent view."

The crowd roared its approval as the marchers neared them. Several nearby windows were raised: streamers and balloons were loosed to gleam white and silver against the deep blue sky; sparkling confetti rained down, and Luke

laughed to see it star his companions' dark hair and skin.

The band passed by. Jumping into the air, Luke caught a glimpse of magenta and gold banners streaming out from a large float. He couldn't read the message on the small flags, but from the cheers, it was a popular sentiment.

Luke fell back against the wall. "We could've stayed at the port and played 'one-up'," he said in disgust.

Torbett cocked his head and stared at him. "What? And have you cheat again?"

Luke opened his eyes in a look calculated to imply innocent affront. "Me? I don't cheat! Is it my fault you never learned the rules?"

Torbett grimaced. "I suppose you learned from Solo?"

Mila laughed. "You two sound like you're in primary school. Cut the brangling and grow up." She glanced around. The crowd increased visibly with every second. "If we cut over to the tournament grounds while everyone else's here, we should be able to get seats," she suggested.

Luke nodded. He liked military music, but wanted to see more than the backs of heads. "I'm game," he said. "Tor?"

The other youth shrugged. "Why not?"

Leaving their sanctuary, they dove once more into the ocean of bodies. Torbett led the way and Luke hugged Mila close. The din swelled as they headed deeper into the center of town, and the tone of the crowd shifted. Family groups disappeared and rough-looking space-bos lined the streets. Quarrels and complaints replaced holiday spirits.

"Stralm-damned waste of our taxes," muttered a large, rough-hewn man in a faded ground-services uniform as he pushed past Luke and Mila. His compan-

ion, a piratical-looking woman whose short-cropped hair glinted metalically in the sunlight, agreed loudly. The multicolored jungle-bird athwart her left shoulder screeched in Luke's ear.

Mila stiffened. "I don't like this," she whispered.

Luke also sensed danger, but shrugged it off. He was desert-bred, not used to crowds. That was all that was wrong. However, Mila pressed more closely to him, communicating her growing fear.

Torbett dropped back and Luke saw his own unease mirrored on his friend's face. "Larens, let's just head home. I don't think--"

A scream of fury interrupted him. "Governor Bulscher's a child-murderer!" shrilled an old woman nearby; pushing Mila aside, the crone grabbed the front of Luke's shirt. "He butcher's innocent babies!" she screamed into his face. Luke stiffened. A gloating, foul-tasting malevolence oozed from the woman. Shuddering, Luke pulled out of her grasp; she was swept away by the angrily swelling crowd. Luke reached frantically for Mila, pulled her close again.

"Baby butcher! Baby butcher!" The mob picked up the cry.

"He's a Stralm-damned clone-lover," shouted someone else from the back of the crowd.

"Baby butcher! Clone-lover!" Avidly, the rabble echoed the incendiary slogans. "Baby butcher!"

Luke tensed. The mob was working itself into a mindless fury. "Baby butcher, baby butcher!" The chant took on a frenzied beat. "Clone-lover, clone-lover!" Above the taunts, Luke heard the clatter of running stormtroopers. He looked around frantically. They had no place to run; the unsettled mob penned them in. Angry gestures and curses escalated with every second. "Be care-

ful," Luke whispered in Mila's ear.

She nodded and clasped his hand. He squeezed her reassuringly and tapped Torbett on the shoulder. "Over there." He pointed with his chin toward the scant protection of a canopied doorway. Desperately, they shoved through the crowd and Luke breathed more easily once they reached their too-small island of safety.

He eyed the canopy overhead. Releasing Mila, he leaped for the crossbar and swung up and over. From this precarious perch he peered around, trying to gauge their danger. That there was a danger, he was very sure. He scouted desperately for an escape path. Something would happen here, and soon, and they mustn't be involved.

An armored aircar, flanked by white-shelled foot-troops, forced its way through the congested streets. The top of the aircar slid back and a fussy-looking bureaucrat, plump with decades of good living, stood up. He addressed the crowd, but his words failed to soothe anyone.

"Good people, such behavior is ill-advised, most ill-advised." His voice quavered as three ruffians pressed closer to his aircar and rocked it back and forth. Two stormtroopers subdued the space-bos and the politician tried to continue his speech. He could not be heard over the shouts of the mob.

"Does he think he's doing any good?" Luke asked, looking down at Torbett and Mila.

Torbett craned his neck to look up at Luke. The younger man's pleasant face was a study in disgust. "Bulcher's been here so long he thinks he belongs." He grimaced. "The fool doesn't realize he's hated more for being an off-worlder than for being crooked."

"Off-worlder? But--" Luke sized up the motley crowd surrounding the governor's aircar, then glanced back down

at Torbett. "But he's human stock, same as the natives."

"So? He's a Khobardite." Torbett pointed to a wookiee shaking a massive fist at the governor. "That wookiee's family's probably been here four or five generations. Since the end of the slaving raids, anyway."

Luke, not sure he understood, frowned. Before he could comment, an angry shout swelled from the thousand-throated mob and the horde surged forward. Simultaneously, stormtroopers converged on the area down both main avenues.

A small figure, easy to mistake for a child, darted from the crowd and kicked a stormtrooper's leg. The crowd cheered, but their cheers turned to angry curses when the trooper batted his attacker aside with his rifle.

Luke swung down from the canopy. "Come on, we can't get caught here." Grabbing Mila's hand, he shoved Torbett out of the alleyway.

A dull tramping from many booted feet spurred him to further action. Pushing, pulling, prying between the close-packed bodies and taking advantage of every millimeter of free space, he dragged his companions to the fringe of the crowd.

They broke through. Behind them shrilled a high-pitched ululating scream that seemed to go on forever.

Luke, there's danger!

"Down!" Luke reacted immediately to the echo of Obi-Wan's voice. He pushed Torbett and Mila to the ground and they huddled there, terrified, as pandemonium broke loose and the Imperial stormtroopers opened fire.

"I'll never complain about boredom again." Luke ducked as a laser beam sizzled past to burn a smoking hole in the wall centimeters from his head.

"Can we put in for combat pay?"

Torbett asked, trying to shield Mila as much as possible.

"What pay? We volunteered." The blasters stilled. Luke raised his head cautiously. Moans and cries of horror drifted to him, and the stench of charred and burned fur, flesh, and feathers filled the air. He gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to be sick. "Come on, let's get out of here." He climbed to his feet, then reached down to pull Mila to hers.

Dazed, she stumbled against him. "They weren't armed. Those--those soldiers just opened up and fired on an unarmed crowd and now all those people are dead." Her voice was flat, emotionless, and Luke realized she had never seen violent death before.

Putting one arm around her shoulder for support, he forced her to look at him. "Now do you see why we've got to fight? Unless you want this to happen again and again?"

She shuddered, looked away. "But you--you're joking about it. You and Torbett both, you--"

Torbett got to his feet. "Because if we don't joke, little one, we'll cry. This isn't a play-war."

She hunched her shoulders and turned away from him. "No. No, it's--"

Run, Luke, run!

"We can talk later," Luke said. "Let's go."

Hugging the wall, they made it to an alleyway and ran down it. At the end, Torbett turned to the right.

No, Luke.

"No, not that way, this. Come on." Luke turned left. "We have a better chance this way."

Torbett and Mila did not argue. Luke

cut down one alleyway, then another; he led the way into yet a third byway, only to be brought up short by a solid wall.

"Uh, we took a wrong turn somewhere." Torbett looked around suspiciously. The whine of blasters, heart-stoppingly close, started up again.

Luke prodded the wall. It was as solid to the touch as to the eye. "Damn, I know this is right." He glanced around, wondering why he had been guided to this blind alley. It had to be safe; he had followed Obi-Wan's voice carefully, and had done everything right.

Run, Luke, run.

He looked back at the building in his path. The three-story structure seemed no different than the others fronting the dead-end. Raising his eyes to the rooftop, he spied their way out. He pointed to the trellis climbing the wall. "Han says it's always safer to take to the roofs, because nobody ever looks up--especially not stormtroopers." Face creased with worry, Luke glanced at Mila's long skirt. "Can you make it?"

Nodding, she swung onto the trellis, the panels of her skirt fluttering behind her. Luke darted a glance around the enclosed area. "Now you, Tor." As Torbett followed his sister up the trellis, Luke ran to the head of the alleyway and squinted in both directions. Nothing. Yet.

He raced back to the trellis. Fitting hands and feet to the rungs, Luke climbed after Torbett and Mila. All three made the roof, and for several seconds just looked at one another doubtfully. Then Mila peered over the edge of the roof. Shaking her head, she looked back at Luke. "Now what?"

Luke smiled grimly. "Now we head home."

Identical expressions of alarmed doubt spread over the two faces turned to him. "We what?" Leaning back against the

chimney, Torbett folded his arms across his chest.

Luke waved vaguely toward the westing sun. "That way. We head home." *Home?* Yes, with Brinicia Kylar to heal the ravages of the day.

Torbett studied Luke carefully. "Leaving aside that 'that way' takes us miles out of our way, what do we do when we come to the next street? Jump?"

"If we have to." Luke glanced around. Andrasar's low sky-line afforded him an excellent view of the city, which spread in all directions to the horizon. With its narrow, winding byways suited only for foot-traffic, this part of the city was ideally suited for roof-work. "Look, guys, we're safe as stone up here. Down on the street we'd be picked up by a foot-patrol inside of three blocks."

"So let's wait here until it's safe, then go down," Torbett suggested.

Luke shook his head. "We don't know how long that'll be. We can use the roofs until we leave the inner city and hit the higher residential area. Then we'll have to go to ground. Meanwhile, come on, let's go." He led the way over the connecting roofs until they reached the end of the row of houses. A bay window, facing an identical structure in the house across the way, jutted into the narrow lane. "We can jump here, where it's narrower." The distance was jumpable, barely, but the drop to the ground was a good twelve to fifteen meters.

Torbett measured the distances with his eyes. "The things I get talked into for the Alliance." He glanced around. "Well, wish me luck." Backing up, he got a running start and threw himself across the gap. He landed heavily; rolling onto his back, he stared up at the sky.

"Tor! Tor!" Worried, Luke called across to his friend. "You all right?"

Torbett said nothing for a very long minute, then pushed himself up and

glared at Luke. "I'm fine," he said, "no thanks to you. Mind leaving something for the Imperials?"

Mila shivered. "Don't joke like that."

Luke, uneasy once more, frowned. He studied Mila carefully. Was this feeling simply worry for her? She had had no difficulty in keeping up with them so far, but the long panels of her skirt might entangle her if she tried to repeat Torbett's stunt. "Mila, can you--?"

She gave herself a shake, as though to get rid of a nightmare, then said calmly, "Yes." She backed up, stood poised on her toes a second, then ran forward and launched herself into the air. Luke wondered at the grace of her. For a breathless eternity she seemed frozen against the sky, her arched body defying gravity itself. She somersaulted in the air, landed, and rolled out next to Torbett.

Jolting back to reality, Luke ran to the far end of the roof, turned, and raced toward the edge. He pushed himself off and forward. Closing his eyes, he saw once more the incredible beauty of Mila's flight. For a single second he felt as though he, too, could defy time and gravity and soar to the sun. Then he felt gravity's pull and tumbled toward the roof, very much aware of the twelve meter drop to the ground.

Rolling out safely, he lay there a moment to catch his breath. He opened his eyes. Mila was leaning over him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He nodded, but made no move to get up. "Why didn't you tell me you could fly?"

She smiled for the first time since the riot. "You didn't ask."

Torbett, joining her, grinned. "She's shy," he said, reaching out to ruffle her hair. "She's her school's top athlete."

Luke stared at Mila doubtfully. Most of the girls he had gone to school

with had dropped out to get married or to assume farm chores long before they could worry about things like athletic events. "Oh. Yes. Well, that will come in handy now, won't it?"

Climbing to his feet, he led them over the rooftops. The path he took was winding and circuitous, but by some miracle of the Force they continued moving forward.

Several hours later they had almost reached the edge of the tightly packed inner city area. Arms akimbo, Torbett surveyed the rowhouses facing them across the charm of the main street. "Do we sprout wings?"

Nonplussed, Luke peered around, seeking inspiration. He had received no warning from that shadow voice he carried within, but Torbett was right. This street was impossible to jump. How could they cross and avoid the still dangerous streets?

The roof was bare, empty. Luke glanced over the building edge. Excitedly, he grabbed Torbett's arm and pointed to the building facade. A heavy, plastine-insulated cable was strung between this building and the one across the way. Three flags--Luke recognized the stylized fire-bird of the Imperial coat-of-arms, the trefoil liliun of Kasulur, and the feathered serpent of Andrasar's signet--flapped in the light breeze curling along the winding street. "We'll climb across on that."

Torbett eyes him disbelievingly. "You an advance man for a wonder show or circus?" Not that there seemed some way across this latest barrier--the last, he felt sure, somehow--Luke felt a lightening of his anxiety. Grinning, he shook his head. "The things I get talked into for the Alliance," Torbett repeated. He glared at Luke. "The things I let you talk me into! Why don't we go down and cross the street like law-abiding citizens? Haven't we had enough of this

skytrail?"

"We're not 'law-abiding'," Luke reminded him. It isn't safe to show our faces on the streets yet, I--I just know it. If we get picked up and they make a connection to the riot, Simoth'll have every right to--"

Torbett shook his head in disgust. "Simoth again. I told you--" He lifted his hands in surrender as Luke protested. "Okay, okay. We'll stick to the rooftops until you say not." He peeked over the edge of the roof. "I'll tell you, though, if anyone catches sight of us on that cable, it'll be all over."

Luke glared at him, but ignored the provocation of his words. "I'll go first. Mila, you come next, and Tor, you pull up the rear." The others nodded. Mila reached out a slender hand and brushed a strand of darkened hair back from his forehead. "Luck," she whispered. He nodded shyly, then dropped over the edge of the roof to the narrow ledge that ran along the front of the building. He inched his way to the guy-wire, clinging desperately to the face of the building with his fingertips. He didn't let himself look down. This was not the same as flying Beggar's Canyon.

Reaching the wire, he carefully let himself down until he could grab the main cable with one hand. Then he dropped from the ledge, grunting as his arm suddenly bore the full support of his body. He hauled himself up and, hand over hand, swung across the swaying cable, feet dangling fifteen meters above the ground.

He reached the other building. Clinging to its face like a Melcobett rock-spider, he climbed onto the roof. He caught his breath for a moment, then waved Mila over. She made the trip with skillful speed, and he was struck once more with wonder at her grace.

As soon as Mila joined Luke on the roof, Torbett began his trip. Luke kept a careful eye on him.

"Oh sweet Mother."

The agonized despair in Mila's voice iced the blood in Luke's veins. He looked up. A squad of stormtroopers, blast-rifles drawn and at the ready, had entered the street. The leader raised a hand, brought them to a halt. Under his instructions they fanned out to search the houses lining the street.

Mila grabbed Luke's arm. "They'll see him," she said hopelessly. "They'll see him."

Luke pulled her back from the building edge. "Don't say anything," he whispered. "Don't call their attention to the roofs." Biting her lips, she nodded.

The wait seemed endless. Luke knew it must seem twice as long to Torbett, suspended as he was over instant death. The troopers passed beneath the cable, and their muttered complaints drifted upward. "'Keep an eye out for rebels' the captain says. What's he think they do, drop from the sky?"

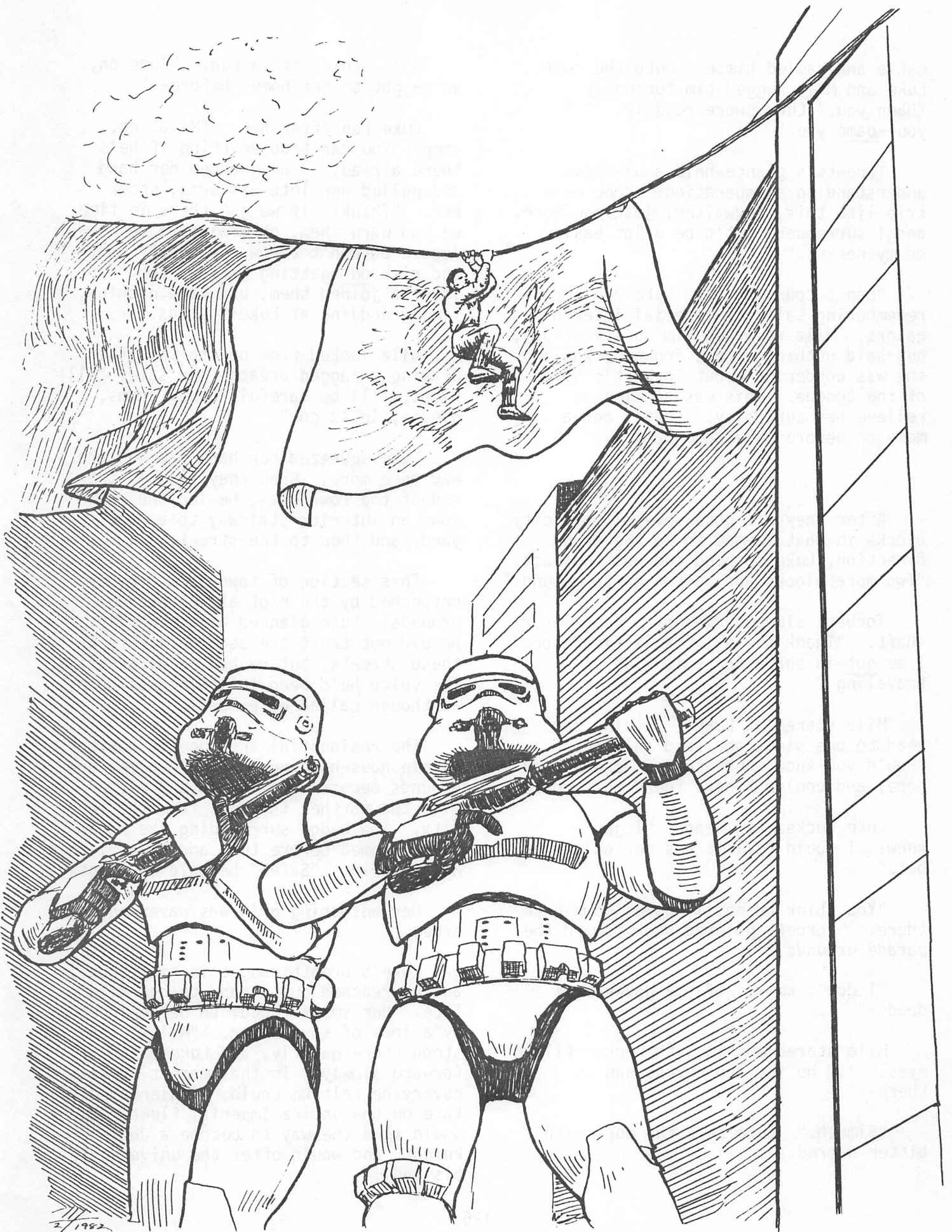
Despite the danger of his situation, Torbett looked across at Luke and grinned. He nodded eagerly and pantomimed dropping onto the troopers' heads. Luke bit back an answering grin and glared warningly at the black youth. Torbett's antics had set the cable swaying, and the flags were flapping wildly.

One of the troopers glanced up. "Wind must be rising," he said. He shifted his stun-rifle and Luke forgot to breathe. Torbett was clearly outlined against the cream-colored background of the Imperial standard.

"Move on there," ordered the squad leader. "Move on."

Gripping one another tightly, Luke and Mila watched unbelievably as the troopers marched out of sight. Luke's throat was dryer than if he had been in the Wastelands a week without water.

Torbett swung across the remaining



cable and hauled himself onto the roof. Luke and Mila hugged him furiously. "Damn you," Luke swore roughly. "If you--damn you."

Torbett's glance held amused and understanding exasperation. "One more trip like this, Skywalker, just one more, and I surrender. It'd be a lot easier on my nerves."

"Don't count on it," Luke replied, remembering tales of Imperial interrogators. Mila regarded him questioningly, but said nothing. Luke frowned, knowing she was wondering about Torbett's slip of the tongue. This was no time to relieve her curiosity. "Let's get a move on before they come back."

After they had gone several more city blocks in what seemed to be the wrong direction, Luke stopped and pointed east. "Two more blocks and we can go to ground."

Torbett slumped against a ventilator shaft. "Thank the All for little favors. I am not in shape for this kind of traveling."

Mila stared at Luke. Cocking her head to one side, she said in wonder, "How'd you know where to go? I was born here, and couldn't have found this route."

Luke ducked his head. "I just-- knew. I could tell it was our only safe bet."

"You think things'll quiet down back there?" Torbett pointed back toward the parade grounds.

"I don't know. If the governor's dead--"

Mila stared at him with horror-filled eyes. "If he is, and anyone saw us there--"

"Simoth." Luke said the word with bitter hatred.

Mila broke into a run. "Come on, we've got to get home, before--"

Luke ran after her. "Mila, no, stop! You can't do anything if he's there already." He grabbed her hand and pulled her into his arms, shook her. "Think! If we get there in time we can warn them, otherwise we're useless. So don't throw our safety away and risk our getting caught, too." Torbett joined them, but said nothing, simply nodding at Luke's words.

Mila looked from one to the other. Drawing a ragged breath, she said, "All right, I'll be careful. But Larens, please, let's go."

Luke squeezed her hand and led the way once more. When they reached the end of the rowhouses, he led the way down an interior stairway to a courtyard, and then to the street.

This section of town seemed empty, untouched by the riot at the parade grounds. Luke glanced around warily. He did not trust the seeming safety of these streets, but he had no alternative. The voice he'd been following was gone, as though called elsewhere.

The residential area opened out to single householdings, and the homes and grounds became more lavish and extensive the farther they got from the inner city. The hedge surrounding the Hadaway house loomed before them and Luke flashed Mila a grin. "Safe!" he said exultantly.

Her answering grin was wavering, but true.

Luke's breath caught in his throat, and he reached out a hand to cup Mila's face. Her smile faded, to be replaced by a look of shy wonder. "Mila?" She stood there quietly, and Luke bent forward slowly. In that moment of discovery he felt he could, singlehandedly, take on the entire Imperial fleet. He would find the way to become a Jedi knight, and would offer the universe to his lady.

Leia's image intruded on Luke's dreams, but before he could sort his tangled emotions, Torbett's voice cut through his half-formed thoughts. "Oh for--look, you two, we can worry about things like that later. Come on, let's get home."

Luke straightened abruptly, his face flaming. Mila spun on Torbett. "You--"

"Hey, later, little sis." Torbett held out his hands in laughing protest. "Right now we--" A sudden explosion rocked them on their feet.

Horror-stricken, Luke stared over Mila's shoulder. Flames licked the red-and gold-tinged smoke that billowed above the hedges and lit the evening sky. Torbett's laughter stilled. Mila shook her head dazedly as she faced the blaze. "No." She tried to deny what had happened. "No, no, no."

Luke grabbed her before she could throw herself through the gap in the hedges, held her close. Sanctuary was closed to them. The riot, and the assassination attempt on the governor, were all the provocation the Imperials had needed to declare Torbett's family outlaw.

It isn't fair. It wasn't our fault. We did everything right. Everything! But such thoughts did them no good now. Later, perhaps, when they had a moment to spare from running--

Luke cursed under his breath. He touched Torbett's arm. "Tor, come on. We have to get away before they come looking for us."

Torbett nodded. Luke put a protective arm around Mila. Swaying, she came to him without argument. They sped away from the burning house, and Luke's mind kept pace with their racing feet. In that first moment of horror, he had tried to make contact with Brinicia Kylar and Coven Hadaway, only to meet icy blankness. All through the flight from the parade grounds, the peace of the Hadaway house

had sustained his hope. Once they reached home, and Brinicia Kylar, things would be all right. But now--now Brinicia Kylar was dead, or as good as, and Luke wondered uneasily if things would ever be good again. Where could they run? Where find safety?

Alerted to a new danger by a noise behind them, Luke pulled back against the shadows thrown off by the trees and shrubbery of the neighboring house. He pushed Mila down, flashed a warning signal to Torbett. They crouched in silence as a squad of stormtroopers marched past, heading toward the barracks. There were no prisoners with them.

Luke stared after them, a cold fury burning in his eyes. Roaring flames attacked the sky, and several smaller explosions sounded. The troopers broke into a gaited run. When they were out of sight, Luke turned to Torbett. "First we find shelter, then we wait for the port to open." Pulling Mila close, he sheltered her against his chest from the sight of the holocaust.

Torbett looked at him strangely, then nodded. "All right, Luke. Lead the way."

Mouth a grim slash of determination, Luke led the way back to the inner city by a path only he could find.

★

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"She WHAT??!" Han's outraged shout cut General Dodonna off mid-sentence. "No one would try to--" Meeting Dana Moran's rueful glance, Han hissed in exasperation. He glared at the general. "Run that one by me again. What did the princess do?"

"She took off for Llangero! in a single-person scout and said--"

Han spun on his heel and sprinted

toward the *Falcon*. He ignored Dana's call of "Han, wait!", shouting, "No time!" over his shoulder. "Chewie!" he yelled. "Start the engines again!" Peering around the rear strut, the wookiee barked a question.

"Now, Chewie! We gotta rescue Her Royalness before she gets herself killed." *And I'll throttle her sure if she does. Damn! I need this like I need another hole in my head. My arm still giving me trouble, Luke off on a damnfool mission somewhere, and Leia. . .* Anger and fear battled for supremacy in his thoughts and he cursed roundly.

Barely growling an explanation to Chewbacca, Han charged up the *Falcon's* landing ramp and into the cockpit. He initiated the preflight checkdown, then opened an outside channel to control center.

"Control, clear this area in ten seconds or I fry the brass." His words were clipped, his eyes almost black with suppressed fury. "I'm taking off." He closed transmission, looked around. Chewbacca had not followed him. "Chewie," he shouted as he belted in, "lift ramp now!"

Han fed the coordinates into the navicomputer and checked engine status. Chewbacca stalked into the cockpit and squeezed his bulk into the copilot's seat. Frowning slightly, Han made a minute adjustment to the 'puter, then flicked on the comm-unit again. "Control, this is Solo. Your ten seconds are up. I'm taking off--"

"Area clear, Captain Solo. You're free to--"

"--now." Han cut communication and fired the retros, then punched the proper departure pattern on the board. The *Falcon* shuddered and leaped free of gravity. Han brought her out on the ecliptic and shot into hyperspace at ten standard units.

Chewbacca wuffled questioningly, and Han shook his head. "No time to worry

about smuggler's secrets, Chewie." He frowned, knowing he had indeed risked one of the smuggling guild's most important trade secrets: the fact that a small ship, traveling just under full light, could make the Jump at ten units rather than fifteen, had saved more than one illicit cargo. Now it saved him precious time--and might save the princess.

He yanked off his headset and slumped into his seat. Now came the hard part. Waiting. It would take three days to get to Llanderol, and that was by pushing the *Falcon's* engines all the way. Even so, he'd not get there before the princess. She had appropriated a much slower single-person scout, and would have to make at least one air/fuel stop, but she had a three-day head start. With luck, he would get to Llanderol only an hour or so after she landed. Whether that would be in time or not--

He slammed his fist against the console, jarring the headphone to the floor. Unbuckling, he bent to pick the headset up. *She'd better not be dead, damn her! I want to wring her slender neck with my own two hands.* "I'll kill her," he snarled through gritted teeth. "If the Imperials haven't strung her out to dry, I'll skin her alive and feed her to a serval cat."

"Now that," said an unexpected voice behind him, "sounds extreme, but entirely warranted. Need any help?"

Adrenalin pumping into his system, Han spun his chair to face the potential danger, quick-drawing his blaster as he did so. He jammed his weapon back into his holster when he recognized Dana Moran. The young aide lounged against the cockpit's door jamb.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Han snapped.

Dana shrugged. "It looked like an interesting trip." Han's mouth tightened angrily and Dana hastily added, "Dodonna said to keep an eye on you, just in case you did kill the princess, and Chewbacca

said I was welcome to come along." Han glared at the wookiee and Chewbacca returned his look with an air of spurious innocence. Dana grinned at the exchange between the partners. He pointed over his shoulder. "So anyhow, I rode out the take-off in the common-room." His grin widened and he added, "Maybe I can help you dispose of the body."

The control panel chittered and Han directed a pointed glance at Chewbacca. The wookiee, who had been following the last part of the conversation with an open-mouthed grin, bent his attention to the instruments in front of him. Han turned back to Dana and shook his head. "Llangerol's the most heavily guarded prison planet in the sector. You'll be in my way."

Dana's grey eyes narrowed and his chin jutted out in a way that Han recognized. Damn rebels! Weren't there any sane cowards among them?

"I won't be in the way," Dana said coolly. "I know my way around Llangerol."

"What?"

"I know my way around--"

Han held up a warning hand. "I don't want to hear this."

Dana smiled wryly. "Guardsmen mind each other's backs, Brother-of-Arms."

"I said I didn't want to hear." Han fingered the scar on his chin as he considered the young man facing him. The same age as Luke Skywalker, Dana lacked Luke's air of unsophisticated innocence. A good pilot, a good warrior, witty, urbane, he clearly revealed his Guardsman training. "What makes you think I'm ex-Guards?"

Dana moved into the cockpit. "Whenever you drop the 'I-am-but-a lowly-smuggler' act, it's obvious. You know what they say. 'Once a Guard--'"

"'--always a Guard'." The corners of

Han's mouth turned down. "Not running with rebels."

Dana quirked a cynical brow. "It's inevitable," he said, dropping into the navigator's seat. "Look who they hand-pick for the Guards. Young sprigs with the intelligence to ask questions." He snorted. "And then they wonder why the Guards had the highest defection rate of any of the services."

Han cursed his carelessness. Ten years of hiding, of learning to blend with the criminal elements of many planets, of learning even to think like a smuggler, and now he'd put it all at risk. His jaw tightened over his self-anger and he spun back to the *Falcon's* control board. Who knew what could happen? Or who would sell out whom? He shoved the head-set back on its hook.

"I ain't got time to argue, Dana." Deliberately, he donned his worst manner. "Her Glory's damnfool scheme'll likely backfire, and with me not there--" He hesitated, surprised at the pain that shot through him at the thought of what might happen to the princess.

Grimacing, Han directed his attention back to the navicomputer. Damn her! He'd kill her for putting him in such a position!

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"Look, Olmes, you guys gotta get out of here. I'm a Stralm-damned courier, not a housemother!"

Luke stared at the scrawny redhead. "You're part of the underground," he said quietly. "That means you help the Alliance any way you can."

Zimbe Varsher swallowed so deeply his prominent Adam's apple bobbed. Shaking his head he said, "No way, hotshot."

This ain't a safe-drop. You characters stay here any longer and there'll be so much talk I'll blow my cover sure. And I can't help your precious Alliance any rotting on Kessel, now can I?"

Torbett looked up from his bowl of watery gruel. "He's right, Larens. And we have a package to deliver to Paruna." He looked out the grime-encrusted windows; it was impossible to tell the color of the sky. "Halaris says the official word is we came to Kasulur to orchestrate the governor's assassination; so far there's been no mention of the tapes."

He shoved the bowl aside. "Halaris also says the port opens this morning. If we don't take advantage of the initial confusion, the Mother alone knows how long we'll be trapped here." His hand tightened around his spoon, and Luke knew he was remembering his parents. "This whole mission's in vain if we don't get back to base." Very carefully, as though afraid it would break, he centered the spoon in front of him.

Luke shifted, bringing Mila into view. She had come out of her dazed stupor, but was still quiet and withdrawn. Would she hold them back if they had to make a break for freedom? He thought of Leia, of all she had sacrificed, of Ben, of Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen. It would have to be risked. The rebellion was more important than any of them.

Pushing away from the table, Luke walked over to the sagging day-bed Mila was sitting on. He knelt at her feet, took her hands in his. "Mila?" She looked up at him, brought him slowly into focus.

"Larens?"

He squeezed her hands reassuringly. "We've got to leave, Mila. We have to get to the spaceport, find a ship, and get back to Cora--to base."

"All right." She stood, and her hands slid out of Luke's grasp. Walking to the

door, she stood calmly waiting.

Luke stared after her, then shook his head wearily. Time enough to worry about her later. Right now they had to get off Kasulur. He turned, eyed Varsher coldly. "Where are those blasters you said you'd get us?"

The skinny courier ran to the dented alumoy chest shoved under the window. Unlocking it, he dumped the filthy contents into a pile on the floor and lifted out a false bottom. He tossed Luke a blaster, Torbett a rifle. Squatting back on his heels, he smirked slyly. "Well?"

Luke hefted the blaster, sighted along the barrel, checked the gauge. Torbett repeated his action with the rifle, then caught Luke's eye and nodded. Luke turned back to Varsher. "You gun-running on the side?" The weapons were newer than anything the Alliance had, newer than the weapons issued to Starfleet.

Pointedly maintaining a silence, Varsher tossed them each an extra power-pack, then started repacking the trunk.

"I'll need a weapon, too." The voice, quiet, gentle, and rockfast, interrupted them. Luke spun to the door. Mila was staring at the trunk. Varsher eyed her doubtfully, and flicked a furtive side-glance at Luke.

Torbett frowned. "Mila, you've never shot at anyone in your life."

Ignoring him, she walked over to the trunk. She knelt in front of it and lifted out one weapon after another, painstakingly examining each one.

"Can you use a blaster, Mila?" Luke felt uneasy arming her, but an extra weapon would come in handy if there were any trouble at the port. Mila nodded and continued examining the contraband weapons spread out in front of her.

Despair and pain edged Torbett's voice when he said, "Target shooting." He caught

Luke's gaze. "Sport." He shook his head. "And that was only with a hol-gun. She's never hunted to a kill."

Luke adjusted the safety on his blaster and shoved it into his belt. "She a good shot?" Torbett nodded reluctantly. "Let her pick a blaster, then. She may save our lives." He shoved down the thought of the gentle girl he had met so long, so short a time ago. War left little time for gentleness. Maybe when they got back to base. . .

After Mila chose a weapon, Luke faced Varsher. "Get rid of every trace of us."

The courier bridled. "I ain't dumb, ya know. It's my life at stake, too."

Mila shivered and Luke flashed her a quick look of concern. His stomach tightened over a sudden upsurge of bile. This had to work, it had to. He jerked his head toward the door. "Come on," he said, "let's go."

Dressed in clothing provided by Varsher, clothing that hid their faces and their weapons, the three young partisans slipped out of the house into the brightening morning. Keeping to the back lanes, to the paths used by those outside and beyond the law, they made their way to the city gates. Once Luke thought he caught a glimpse of Halaris's pale blue-purple hide, but when he peered more closely at the scattered early morning crowds he could not spy her. He shrugged, resumed his journey. Why would their Alliance contact be following them?

From the safety of the curtaining market-stall, Luke surveyed the city gates. He shook his head in dissatisfaction. "I don't like it."

Futility and frustration etched on his face, Torbett peered from Luke to the gate. "What don't you like now? We have a clear path to the port."

Luke frowned. "That's just it. If the

Imps think we're part of an espionage team, why didn't they declare martial law? That gate should be swarming with so many soldiers a mindrial couldn't slip through."

Torbett studied the gate thoughtfully. "Should we go back to Varsher's?"

Luke watched the gate through narrowed eyes. Finally he shook his head. "I don't trust that set-up, either." He surreptitiously eased his blaster from his belt, testing the draw. "We'll have to chance it." *And may the Force be with us!* Even though it would add to the risk of being identified, he wished, not for the first time, that he carried his father's sabre.

Shrugging deeper into his hooded tunic, Luke led Torbett and Mila toward the gate. Mila had been quiet since they left Varsher's, and Luke put a comforting arm around her shoulders. Insinuating themselves into the tail of a small party leaving Andrasar, the three passed quickly by the checkpoints; the bored guards waved them through without even looking at the hasty IDs Varsher had provided them.

Luke kept up a running chatter of small talk with Torbett and Mila until they were several hundred meters from the gate and could fall behind the other party. Then Torbett took off his large-brimmed hat and fanned himself with it. "So far, so good," he said.

Mila turned up the collar of her quilted jacket and dug her hands into her pockets. Luke hugged her close; she was shivering, but whether from the morning chill or from a premonition of danger he did not know. Comfortingly, he ran his hand up and down her arm. "It isn't over yet," he warned Torbett, "but it is a good beginning."

Huge farm-tracts filled the land outside Andrasar's city limits. Luke, obedient to the prompting of his inner voice, led the others off the main road and across the fields. It was too early

in the growing season to worry about harvesters, and they did not spot any overseer droids.

A breeze blew up, and several strands of Mila's hair escaped her hair clasp. Luke signalled a halt. Smiling at her, he refastened her hair-bob. Her hair seemed like spider-silk threads slipping through his fingers. The walk seemed to have restored her to normal. She smiled at him shyly. Taking her chin between his thumb and finger, Luke gave her head a little shake. "It'll be okay," he assured her, "really it will." Drawing her closer, he kissed her on the forehead, a gentle kiss of half-promise.

Fingers twined together, Luke and Mila walked along slowly, dropping farther and farther behind Torbett. The sun grew warmer. Strangely, despite the horror of the past four days, Luke had never felt happier. The clean smell of the tuber-grasses, the occasional hum of insects, the silver and green field, combined to give a sense of timelessness to the moment. If it weren't for the weight of the blaster at his waist, and for the knowledge of the tragedy that had gone before and that might yet come to be, Luke would have been content. As it was, he thought himself lucky. He had learned to savor the moment.

It was noon by the time Luke led them back to the main road. They continued on, and soon the spaceport's control tower and boarding ramps hove into sight.

Luke spotted the trap immediately. The gates yawned open invitingly, and a minimal number of guards were stationed at the checkpoints. The port--which Halaris had sworn would reopen that morning--was deserted. Luke snorted. "And Simoth is sitting on the ramp of the *Saralínah*, all set to snap binders on us."

"Do we spring the trap?" As though for reassurance, Torbett fondled the blast-rifle concealed beneath his cloak.

Luke did not answer immediately. Squinting, he studied the field. It was large--almost as spread-out as Andrasar itself--and the *Saralínah* was off to one side. If Simoth was setting a classic trap, most of his men would be concentrated at that point. If matters could be helped a little--

He spun on Torbett. "Quick! Give me your extra power pack!"

Flipping his cloak over his shoulder, Torbett dug the pack out of his belt pouch and handed it to Luke. "What do you have in mind?"

Luke smiled grimly. "A trick I learned in Cinncinnatus from a friend." If diversionary tactics had worked for Chimene Darklighter and the other members of Leia's SWIPE team, they should also work for him.

"Stay out of sight," he warned Mila and Torbett. "I'll be right back." Luke crouched low, and set off in a wide circle that brought him to a point about one-quarter of the way around the force-field perimeter. Setting his power-pack on overload, he shoved it next to the force field.

He scrambled away and doubled back on himself, repeating his actions about half-way closer to the checkpoint, then raced back to Mila and Torbett.

"Get ready to run," he warned them, puffing slightly from his exertions. "If this works--" A loud explosion interrupted him. He turned, stared at the field. "I didn't--" A second explosion, closer, sounded. "--didn't know the explosion would be that strong." The guards at the gate, alerted by the first explosion, were milling on their feet. When the second explosion came, they chased onto the field in the direction of the noise.

Fight. And now we 'take advantage'

of the empty gate and charge into the port. Well, why not? If it could be turned to their advantage, and not the Imperials'?

Drawing his blaster, Luke motioned the others to follow suit. He nodded curtly. "Now."

At Luke's command, they raced across the open ground and through the gates. Torbett started in the direction of the *Saralindah* and Luke pulled him back. "The *Saralindah*'s surrounded by three-quarters of the city's ground-forces, and she's not fast enough to get us through the picket ships when we clear atmosphere." Scurrying low to take as much advantage of cover as possible, Luke led Torbett and Mila away from the Alliance scout-ship. "When I set off the power-packs I saw something that'll be perfect."

A bright lance of flame stung past Luke's cheek. He jerked his weapon up and out, firing without thought at the armored trooper at the end of the aisle. The shot burned a gaping hole in the white-shell's torso, its force jerking the trooper off his feet and spinning him around.

Luke did not wait for the stormtrooper to fall. "Come on!" Running, he led Torbett and Mila down one branching side aisle of berthed ships after another, coming at last to a section of the field that was deserted, save for a sleek grey and black space yacht at the far end.

"We can't steal that," Torbett said. "That's a police caravel."

"Thought so," said Luke in satisfaction. "That means it'll be more than fast enough to break us through any pickets. Let's go."

Torbett grabbed Luke's arm. "Luke, didn't you hear me? It's a Stralm-damned police ship!"

Luke yanked his arm out of Torbett's grip and glared at the younger man. "I don't believe it. We're on the boards

for sabotage, espionage, assassination, and treason--any of which'll get us the death penalty or a brain-wipe--and you're worried about stealing a police ship?"

"That's not--"

Luke made a quick slashing motion with his hand. "Later. We have to get out of here."

Run, Luke, run!

"Tor, Larens, run!" Mila's warning shout strangely paralleled Luke's mind-whispered alarm. A squad of foot-soldiers raced across the field toward them.

"Come on!" Crouching low, Luke headed back down the aisle. He reached the nearest docking bay wall and dove behind it. Breathlessly, Torbett and Mila plopped down next to him. Luke risked a peek over the rim of the containment wall, only to be driven back by concentrated fire-power that gouged huge chunks from the poured stone wall.

"Hey!" he protested. "That's no hand blaster!"

Mila clambered up the sloped side of the retaining wall. Keeping cover between herself and the Imperials, she peered over the bay rim. She stiffened. "Oh, no."

Worried, Luke put a hand out to her. "Mila? What's wrong?"

She slipped into his arms. He held her for a second, for comfort, then set her on her feet. "The police ship," she said. "The ship is firing its guns at us."

Luke leaned back against the docking bay wall. "And we're caught in the cross-fire between them and the stormtroopers. Nice." He eyed his companions measuringly. If they didn't want to be taken like wild banthas in a tusken trap, they'd better do something, and fast. "Mila, how fast are you?"

She exchanged a puzzled look with Torbett and shrugged. "Very."

"Can you draw the yacht's firepower? Long enough for me to get inside and take the ship?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "This close, the gunner would be focusing on manual, so I can probably evade him, but what about them?" She jerked her head in the direction of the troopers.

"Tor? Lay down a covering fire for us?"

Torbett fixed him with an incredulous gaze. "This is the worst scheme you've ever had," he said accusingly.

"Give me another plan, then," Luke challenged.

Torbett glared, but said nothing. Then he crawled up the sloping walls of the docking bay. One of the police ship's direct hits had struck a natural flaw in the stone, and a jagged gap had been blasted out. Taking advantage of this, Torbett set up his blast-rifle and began firing at the Imperial troops randomly, and in spurts.

Luke turned to Mila. "All right, be ready to draw the ship's attention the minute I give the signal." Cautiously, he poked his head above the wall rim. Torbett was keeping the stormtroopers busy. Luke nodded to Mila, and she slipped around the retaining wall. The police yacht's twin guns turned as their operator tried to keep her in his sights. She was a whirlwind in action. The gunner fired several times, always one or two paces behind her, and spurts of gravel and rock-dust exploded into the air.

Luke took a deep breath; now it was his turn. He stormed up the docking bay ramp, zigzagged breathlessly across the field. Just as he reached the foot of the yacht's access ramp, the outer air-lock irised open. A uniformed ground-officer drew a bead on Luke even while shouting a warning over his shoulder to

the remaining crew.

Luke brought his weapon up and fired. The officer, clutching his smoking shoulder, slid down the jamb; his weight lodged the door open. His blaster fell from his hand and slid down the ramp to clatter at Luke's feet.

"Mila, Torbett," Luke shouted, "come on!" He charged up the ship's access ramp and jumped over the fallen Imperial officer, dropping into a defensive crouch in the ship's corridor. No one was there.

Hugging the corridor walls, Luke inched his way to the cockpit. The cockpit door was closed, and he reached for the access panel. Suddenly, he froze, sensing danger. Dropping to the ground, he hit the access panel with the barrel of his blaster.

The door slid open and a sheet of fire sprayed out from the cockpit, burning into the wall where Luke had stood only seconds earlier.

Luke fired without thought and his opponents dropped before they could get to safety. Glancing around the smoking cockpit, Luke was amazed that nothing essential had been hit. They could take off immediately.

Luke ran to the canopy window. Mila was crouched in the protection of a containment wall sixty meters away, firing a steady stream of blasts at a line of troopers sweeping in from the far side of the field. Torbett, much closer to the police caravel, had dropped back to cover her. Another line of troopers swept in behind Torbett, cutting him off from the ship.

Pushing the gunner's body to the floor, Luke dropped into the hot-seat. He swung the gun around and fired several rounds which sliced through the poured stone surface of the field--and through any bodies in the way. Luke noted with satisfaction that the path to the ship was clear.

Running to the airlock, Luke shoved the Imperial's body off the ramp. "Torbett, Mila, I'll cover you!" Torbett looked up, saw Luke on the ramp. He waved his blaster and headed for the caravel. Mila scooted out from the protection of the bay wall and ran forward. Thirty meters from the ship a familiar grey-clad figure darted out from the sidelines and cut her off.

"Mila!" Luke raised his blaster, got Simoth in his sights. With a movement too quick to follow, Simoth grabbed Mila and swung around to face Luke.

"No!" Luke was afraid to fire lest he hit her. "Mila!" He ran down the ramp. Mila wrestled furiously with Simoth, kicking, hitting out at him. She twisted out of his arms and dropped to the ground. Rolling out, she came up in a racing crouch; Simoth, faster, was on her before Luke could take advantage of the moment and fire.

Luke started off the ramp. Before he could run from the safety of the caravel, Torbett raced up and grabbed him.

"No, you'll be caught, too."

"Let me go," Luke pleaded. Struggling against Torbett's hold, he stared across the field. Captain Simoth stared back at him from cold black eyes. Mila tried kicking out at him again, and he clouted her with his gun butt. Then, holding her in front of him like a shield, he started across the field. "No," Luke screamed once more, almost pulling free of Torbett.

"Damn you, no! We have to get back to the base," Torbett shouted, tears streaming down his face. "Luke, come on!"

Run, Luke run!

Luke ignored the voice. As far away as he was, Simoth heard Torbett's shout. He stopped his advance, studied Luke through narrowed eyes. Even as Luke watched, recognition flared in the captain's eyes. In that bitter moment Luke realized Han had been right: there was

a tape from the Death Star. And Simoth, conscientious, loyal Simoth, had seen it, and knew who Luke Skywalker was.

A bolt burned into the ground next to Luke and Simoth shouted, "Stun! Set your weapons for stun! Lord Vader wants him alive!"

Luke met Simoth's obsidian gaze one more time. Then, face a bitter mask of ice, Luke ran up the ramp of the caravel. As Torbett closed down the ship, Luke ran to the cockpit and belted into the pilot's seat. Through the canopy, he saw Simoth motion his men back. Luke was glad Mila would be safe from the effects of the blastoff, but realized bitterly he would have taken off regardless--he would have had to.

Luke screamed the ship out of Andrasar Spaceport. Torbett staggered into the cockpit and took over the gunner's position. The caravel reached the upper limits of the atmosphere and Luke swooped her out to the ecliptic plane. "Pickets at seven marks," Torbett warned. Luke nodded, but did not answer. Keeping to a steady course, he pulled back on the throttle until the ship was going a hair under full-light.

"She can't stand this long," Torbett warned as the ship began to shudder.

"Won't have to," Luke said tersely. "I'm taking her into hyper."

Torbett flicked a glance at the control console. "We're only eight standard units out."

"I know," Luke said.

"We can't evade them," Torbett warned. "This ship is--"

"We won't have to," Luke said. If Han were right. . .

The pickets loomed in the canopy and he punched the hyperspace coordinates for Corador on the board. He kept an eye on the pickets, driving the caravel

straight toward them. Just as collision seemed imminent, the 'puter showed that they were ten standard planetary units out from Kasulur. Luke punched the board and the entire system dopplered out of existence around them as the caravel, mass unstable because of the nerve-shattering closeness of the Imperial picket ships, jolted into the nebulous never-world of hyperspace.

Torbett stared out the canopy. "We should have been destroyed," he whispered. "Gravitational forces should have torn us apart."

"Smuggler's luck," Luke said, remembering Han's words. *Smugglers always press to the limit, Luke, and when you do, you learn that 'rules' aren't always so. A small ship going at .99 lights can make the Jump in ten or twelve units. But only the Guild will try.*

The Guild, or a desperate rebel.

"That luck better hold up," Torbett said. Luke, weak from the tension of the last few minutes, scarcely heard him. "This is a police caravel. It's got a built-in homing device. They can trace us, Luke, no matter where we go."

Luke stared blindly out the windscreen at the swirling clouds of hyperspace.

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To Han, the three-day journey to Llangerol passed as slowly as a year in a stasis field. He kept the ship in hyper as long as he dared and made the minimum number of jumps. He and Dana went topside once, to alter the *Falcon's* registry markings, but otherwise there was very little to do in hyperspace--except worry.

"Won't the *Falcon* be recognized?" Dana, once again in the navigator's seat, asked with interest.

Han threw a scathing look over his shoulder. "How do I know? The new markings and registry should match information in Starfleet's data banks, but I'm still gonna pray for a miracle when I land. Llangerol-town's not exactly the freest port around, you know." His voice was sharp with a cutting edge of sarcasm.

"You could have taken another ship," Dana pointed out mildly, not reacting to Han's fit of temper.

Han redirected his attention to the scanning board and flicked a toggle angrily, taking his frustrations out on the inoffensive equipment. "There were half-a-hundred things I could have done, and any of them would give us a better chance of getting in and out than this. But they'd all add time, and with the princess on planet already, time's the one thing we can't spend."

He maneuvered the *Falcon* into one of the major entry lanes over the planet. "Okay, Chewie, punch it." As the wookiee's big paws worked the ship's controls, Han reached up and unhooked his headset. Adjusting the earjack, he opened an outside line to Port Control. "Llangerol Port Control, do you copy? This is the *Raptor of Corell*, registry SE23850b, requesting permission to land." He took a deep breath. "Lieutenant Shariod fil Ron piloting, my navigator and co-pilot are aboard."

"State your business, Lieutenant." The controller's bored voice sounded as mechanical as a droid's.

Han's mouth was suddenly dry. He licked his lips. "Um, pri-prisoner transfer under direct order of Lord Darth Vader," he said.

"Stand by for scan, *Raptor*."

Han shifted uneasily in his seat. The pause dragged on forever before Llangerol control responded. "Registry and scan in order, *Raptor*. Enter flight path 73d and land of platform 751m. Report to the ID section for final

verification upon landing."

"Understood. *Raptor* out." Han switched off the comlink and collapsed against the back of his chair. He breathed out a gust of air, then laughed. Shaking his head, he fingered the inside of his collar. "Chewie, this is more damn work than a fletchin' spice load. And we didn't even talk costs with those damnfool rebels."

Dana interrupted Chewbacca's hoot of amused derision. "Han, you get the princess back alive and in one piece and you can write your own ticket."

Han snorted. Straightening, he flipped the toggles on the console and fed in the proper descent pattern. "I'll get her off Llanderol alive and in one piece, all right, but if I give her back that way's another story." He smiled grimly. "If she weren't too old, I'd paddle her good for a stunt like this." Several tell-tales blinked and chattered and he turned his attention to the flashing board. "Damnfool rescue mission. Why'n't Dodonna and Paruna stop her?" Dana opened his mouth and Han held up a hand. "Never mind. I know they couldn't."

"Their plan was even worse," Dana said ruefully. "They wanted to send in a full task force during the prisoner transfer next week." He shrugged. "The princess was tied up with CompCen most of the night. I guess this was the best alternative plan she could come up with."

As he maneuvered the *Falcon* into the proper flight lane, Han frowned over Leia's haphazard plan. She was right: a single agent, sent to infiltrate Llanderol, could marginally hope to succeed; a task force would be detected immediately and captured. But to risk herself when there must be agents in plenty. . .

Damn, I thought she'd gotten over that since the Death Star!

There was a slight jolt as Han landed the *Falcon*.

"Did it have to be Vader's staff?" Dana said.

Han shrugged and shut down the engine. "Always go to the top," he said as he unbuckled. "It saves time." He leaned over, called up an ID template on the forward viewscreen.

Dana whistled soundlessly. "How?"

Han snorted, flicked off the viewer. "I paid for it," he said. "Through the nose."

Quirking a very curious brow, Dana remarked, "Those, uh, 'contacts' of yours must come in handy."

"Very." Han stood and stretched, then noted Dana's bemused air. "Don't worry," he added, "it'll work out." *It better, if we expect to see Corador again.* Resolutely, he pushed aside the doubts and flicked Dana a glance-over. "You bring anything beside that reb issue?" he asked, indicating the blue-grey uniform.

Dana grinned wryly. "Just me."

Han grunted. "Fat lot of good that'll do if you're stuck on ship." He eyed Dana measuringly. The younger man was not as tall as he, and was slightly more slender, but in an emergency, which this was nothing if not--

"You sure you won't be recognized at the prison?"

"That was five shifts ago. By now the entire staff has been rotated out of there."

Han nodded. "Okay, then." He turned to the wookiee. "Chewie, hold down the ship. Close her up, but keep her ready to go at a minute's notice. Over his shoulder, he ordered, "Dana, come with me." He strode to his cabin, Dana closely following.

Han yanked open the door of his locker and dumped half the contents on

the floor before hauling out a black uniform. He tossed that aside and rummaged around until he pulled out a second uniform, which he threw across to Dana. *Thank the Mother I kept my uniforms. Knew they'd come in handy someday.*

"Get changed," he ordered. "We have to stop that idiot before she tries to crack L'angerol." He yanked off his shirt and jeans as he spoke and pulled on his Guardsman's uniform. *Gloves, hats, IDs. Where the hell did I--* He fumbled through the locker again. *Sweet Mother, I'll never find it all.*

Dana fastened the uniform tunic and adjusted it across his shoulders. "She'd do some reconnoitering first," he said hopefully. "Surely she wouldn't--"

"She would. And there's no one to stop her but us." Han searched frantically and, in the bottom of his foot-locker, found auxiliary identification that would cover Dana for the short span of time they would be on L'angerol. Next he unearthed two caps and one pair of black leather gloves.

He studied Dana carefully as he handed him a cap and a pair of gloves. His old spare uniform fit the rebel well: not quite snug enough across the shoulders perhaps, and the calves a bit loose, but it would do. His glance fell to Dana's feet and he nodded in relief. Both he and Dana were wearing plain black boots that were close enough to uniform footwear to pass muster.

Han yanked open the top drawer of his dresser and pulled out a holster and blaster. He checked the gauge and threw it across to Dana. Wordlessly, Dana strapped it on as Han took out a matching holster to fasten around his own waist.

Han keyed on the intercom. "Chewie, lower the ramp. Remember, the first sign of trouble, you take off."

"Nawia--"

"That's an order, Chewie. And this time I mean it."

The silence at the other end of the intercom reproached him more than words. Han groaned. "Chewie, you're no damn good to me dead or captured. You hear? This isn't Cinncinnatus, damn it!"

A grudging response sounded over the intercom. Han shook his head and turned to Dana. "Come on, let's go."

Two black-uniformed figures strode down the *Falcon's* ramp. Dana glanced back at the converted freighter. "Han, she's a piece of junk. Who'll believe we're transporting prisoners in her?"

Han's mouth quirked with grim amusement. "The real *Raptor's* an infiltration ship. The Imperials will assume this was a secret transfer of title. Especially with Vader involved." His eyes darted around the heavily patrolled port. Spotting an aircar leasing stand, he headed toward it. "Come on, before they realize we didn't stop for our ID check."

Han flagged down an attendant droid and presented a credit voucher. The large, barrel-shaped mechanical trundled off, disappearing into the maws of the underground garage. Within minutes it screeched a heavy-duty speeder to a halt in front of them.

Han started toward the speeder and Dana pulled him back. "Be careful," he cautioned. "These things have random monitors, so watch what you say." Han nodded.

They clambered into the aircar and Han engaged the auto-drive. "L'angerol Prison," he said firmly, once more producing his credit voucher. He felt a surge of adrenalin. They'd come through several barriers already. Would this be the one to stop them?

There was a pause small enough for a heartbeat. Han scarcely had time to

wonder if it would be his last before the aircar accepted his voucher and engaged drive. Han flicked a glance at Dana. The other seemed calm and detached, a perfect Imperial officer in his borrowed finery. Han followed Dana's example and settled back into the cushions.

The aircar landed at the edge of the park-like plaza surrounding Llanderol's massive towers. Routine security meant that any closer approach to the prison was done by foot. Han studied the almost featureless monoliths in front of him and shook his head in disgust. No doors or windows interrupted the smoothly indented flow of the triple towers, although massive sensor screens were located halfway up the towers and at their apex. The roof-port on the central tower--closed to all but previously cleared and posted traffic--and a single underground checkpoint offered the only points of entry.

He snorted. "It's still the worst mothering prison in three sectors."

Dana glanced at him quizzically. "The Imperials consider it a 'moderate security' facility," he pointed out.

"Which doesn't prove a thing," Han replied.

Dana looked around, nodded almost imperceptibly toward one of the units of stormtroopers patrolling the park perimeters. "Were you planning on going in by the front door?"

Han assessed the troop strength of the scattered six-man patrols. His grin was edged with recklessness. "As a matter of fact, yes. But we may not have to. Look." He directed Dana's attention across the park. Dana frowned thoughtfully.

The woman was short and attractive, with a strong chin and a sloped nose. She wore the deep red uniform of the Special Police and her black beret perched jauntily on shoulder length silver hair. Her skin was a warm chocolate brown.

Had he not been familiar with the *persona* the princess was using, Han knew he'd never have recognized her. He sympathized with Dana's disbelief.

"Trust me," said Han, "that's her." Anger replaced the fear that had driven him half-way across the galaxy. *And damn her, that ID's a month out of date.* Balling his hands into fists at his side, he growled, "Let's go. I'll pound some sense into her, drag her back to the *Falcon*, then kill her." He strode off across the park, leaving Dana to follow.

*

A hand fell heavily on her shoulder. Leia took one side-long glance at the black leather-gloved fingers gripping her and froze, staring blindly across the plaza. *No, it can't be. Vader's on the other side of the galaxy.*

The fingers tightened. *I will not look*, she thought flatly. *I will not.* They could kill her, but they couldn't make her look. She would stand here staring at Llanderol Prison for the rest of her life rather than turn to look up at--

"Five minutes," said an angry--and all-too-familiar--voice behind her. "Leave you alone for five Stralm-be-damned minutes and--"

I'll kill him. Furious with relief, she spun around. Han caught her wrist just before her fist hit his stomach.

"Guilty conscience, Your Worship?"

Leia pulled away and straightened her dark-red uniform. "I don't know what you're talking about." She eyed Han's tightly fitting Guardsman's uniform resentfully. "Furthermore, I don't know who you--"

As she backed slowly away from Han she bumped into another tall, muscular body. With an odd feeling of entrapment,

she looked up at Dana Moran. Dana held out a sound damper and flicked it on. "Okay, Han," he said with a grin that did nothing to reassure her, "she's all yours."

"Princess, what the motherin' HELL do you think you're DOING??!" Han bellowed. "And don't put those not-so-lily-white hands over your aristocratic ears, damn it!" He hauled her hands down and held them tightly in one of his own while he waved the other under her nose. "Now you listen to me, Princess Leia Organa, and you listen GOOD!" The volume of his voice increased once more, bouncing off the confines of the damper field.

Leia winced. "Now see here, So--"

"No, you see here, oh high-and-mighty one! What kind of moronic stunt IS this?"

"It's not! It was carefully pl--"

"No, don't tell me! I don't want to hear it!" Han released her hands only to grab her shoulders. "I should shake you until you get some sense in that feeble royal brain of yours."

Leia cast an appealing glance up at Dana. "Don't look at me," he said. "I think Han left out a thing or two."

"Yeah," Han said grimly. "Damn, Your Glory, I really needed this. Me and the *Falcon* come limping back to Corador Base and we're there all of two seconds before Dodonna gives me the good news. You kiting off on some damnfool crusade without telling him, or Willard, or Paruna, or anyone. Just a cute little note: 'Off to rescue brother, back soon'."

Icy rage swept over her. She pulled out of Han's grip and glared up at him. "How DARE you?! Do you think I came here on a Stralm-be-damned whim??!"

"What the hell am I supposed to think? You could have waited for me, or Luke, or Dana, or someone to give you backup, but no, not you." Han's voice grew loud again. "I check into things and what do I find?

You standing in front of Llangero1 Prison, dressed up playing Special Police." His glance raked her from head to toe. "And what possessed you to dye your hair silver, of all the stupid ideas?"

"She's in disguise," Dana reminded Han kindly.

"Yes," Leia said, still furious at them. "Just as you two are." She gestured toward their black uniforms.

"Yes," Han mimicked. "But Dana and I don't have out-of-date IDs, damn it!"

Leia's fury melted. "What?" she said weakly.

"You heard me." Han seemed, illogically, to be fanning his anger with the fact that she was unhurt.

"Han, just remember we can still be seen, will you?" warned Dana, glancing around uneasily. "Even if they can't hear you, those guards over there just might think it odd if you hit a Special Police Officer."

"Oh, I won't hit her," Han said meaningfully. "Now, Your Stupidityship, we're leaving, and we're leaving this minute. So--"

"No," Leia said. "I won't leave without Chalil."

As Han opened his mouth, she added, "What'll you do, Solo, carry me kicking and screaming through the city and onto the *Falcon*?"

Han closed his mouth and looked at her sharply. "Actually," said Dana as Han stared at Leia, "I was rather thinking of knocking you out and saying you'd fainted. Now come on, Princess, what're you trying to do, commit suicide? Whatever you had in mind it won't work. It's too dangerous, especially for you."

Leia took a deep breath and tried to regain the ragged edges of her temper.

It had taken all her strength to make this attempt at all. Now for Han and Dana to tell her that the only plan having even the remotest chance of success was too dangerous. . . *I know it's dangerous, but they're the best odds I could get.*

She looked from Dana to Han. "No," she said, shaking her head. "Chalil's been rotting in there for four years, and I want him out." Han and Dana cut sudden glances and Leia felt her blood run cold again. She caught Han's arm. "Han, you can get him out, you and Dana. You're the best--"

"Ah, shit," said Han. "I knew it. Well, forget it." He shook off her hand.

Leia forced back the anger and the fear and looked pleadingly at Dana. He shook his head. "No way, Princess," he said gently. "Think. If Chalil's been in there for four years--"

"It's because of me, isn't it?" said Leia slowly. "If it weren't for me you'd do it, wouldn't you?"

Han and Dana stared at her, then looked at each other. "Hell, no," they said in chorus.

All emotion fled. "Damn you both," Leia said coldly. "There's nothing worse than cautious daredevils." She whirled and snatched the sound damper out of Dana's hand. She clicked it off and quickly moved away from the two men. Han reached out to her angrily and she danced out of the way of his grasping hands. "No. And don't try anything violent. I doubt if even your ID can hold up against the investigation that'd be launched.

Twin spots of color appeared high on Han's cheeks. "It won't work, Princess," he said.

"It will." Her breath caught raggedly and she forced herself to approach the matter calmly. "I want to get inside L1angerol. If my ID's out-of-date, yours is acceptable, or you wouldn't be here.

Get me in there, Han. I want my brother."

She could feel the knot in her stomach, the knot that had been there since Alderaan's destruction. It was throbbing, threatening to overpower her; and no matter how hard she drove herself, no matter how many times she fell into bed so exhausted she couldn't see straight, still the knot tightened, and the ghosts came back to haunt her. To haunt her and to accuse her of their deaths. . .

Chalil smiled, and it lit her world. He clasped her waist and swung her into the air. "And what does little Leia want?" he asked her teasingly. "Shall we get her the stars and the sun for her birthday? Or will a Senate seat do?"

She laughed down at him, standing there all silver and blue in Alderaan's sun. She laughed, and accepted his gift, and in that moment sealed Alderaan's death.

She closed her eyes against the still-raw pain. Well, she had been responsible for Alderaan's death, there was no gainsaying that. But that did not mean she was forced to let Chalil rot in an Imperial cell. She'd get him out, she had to. And maybe that would make up a bit for Alderaan. . .

Opening her eyes, she met Han's stare. His eyes were darkened by some emotion she could not fathom. A tic leaped in his cheek. "Damn you, Princess." His voice was cold, flat, unemotional. He turned to Dana. "Go back to the *Falcon*. Tell Chewie what happened, and that I said not to wait past--"

"Forget it, Han. I told you once, Guardsmen mind each other's backs."

Han stared at him silently; then, still without words, he reached out and grasped Dana's shoulder. He turned back to Leia. "All right, Your Worship, let's go. Stay behind me and keep your mouth

shut." His face was grimmer than she had ever seen it, and Leia knew he meant what he said. "You say or do anything without my permission and I cut my losses then and there, leave you for the Imps to sweep up, and get out with my own skin intact."

Cheeks warm with excitement, Leia nodded. She would have agreed to anything at this moment. *Chalil, after all these years. . .*

*

Approaching the checkpoint of the Imperial prison with outward nonchalance, Han inserted his ID card into the admittance mechanism. Sensors locked onto the card with an audible hum, and the hairs of Han's neck stood to attention. One micron of wrongness on the coating of his card, one slight alteration in color coding, a hair's breadth different on the width of a type-font, and they'd be disintegrated where they stood.

The seconds crawled. Han wondered if he should bid Dana and the princess farewell, and had actually cleared his throat to do so when a voice filtered through the communications system. "Your identification is in order, Lieutenant. You may proceed to the central tower complex. May we see some identification for your companions?"

Han wished for a lucky talisman to stroke. "They're on special assignment for this transfer only. There is to be no official record of their presence here. Check my order specs under code 573df. I have the authority." There was another pause, longer this time. Had he overstepped the limits of his bogus identification? He had had to take the chance, though. To offer ID for Dana only would raise awkward questions about Leia's status.

"Authority acknowledged. You may proceed."

Han removed his ID card from the lock mechanism. The durasteel ground cover slid

back, and Han led the way down the poured-stone ramp to the underground entrance. The door opened automatically --and, despite its mass and weight, silently--as they approached and shuddered shut behind them. There was a series of loud clicks as the tumblers fell into place, locking the door. There was no turning back.

Han strode to the control module in the center of the three-storied main lobby. As he neared the desk, the ensign on duty came to attention. Han returned the ensign's salute and proffered his identification voucher. "Lieutenant Sharriod fil Ron, under direct orders of Lord Darth Vader. I'm taking charge of the transfer of one of your prisoners."

The ensign looked at Han's ID doubtfully. "I wasn't informed of any prisoner transfer."

Han tensed, wondering if they were lost already. From the corner of his eye he could see Dana and Leia stiffen, their hands uncomfortably near their blasters. *Right*, he thought ironically, *the real transfer's scheduled for next week, so scuttlebutt's not reached this low on the kicking post yet.* He offered a silent salute to the princess's more-than-efficient spies. Then he smiled coldly and leaned over the ensign's desk. "Are you questioning Lord Vader?" Nonchalantly, he allowed one finger to hover over one of the brilliantly colored buttons on the desk console.

Swallowing convulsively, the ensign seemed mesmerized by that finger. He darted a pleading look around, but the other junior officers assigned to the duty desk had moved out of earshot at the first mention of Lord Vader and there was no sign of his superior officer. He looked back at Han. "No, sir, but--"

Han leaned both hands flat on the desk. He bent nose to nose with the sweating ensign. "Lord Vader does not broadcast his plans to the entire Empire. It is enough that he--and the Emperor--know his mind. You and I have but to obey his command. I would not want to

report this delay to Lord Vader. He would not be amused."

The ensign closed his eyes tightly and swallowed once more. In a very small voice he said, "I am sorry. I have no orders to allow a prisoner transfer, sir."

Han felt ready to scream. Of all the rotten luck. To have on duty someone who knew how to obey orders in a security facility. He glanced around. Even if they knew where Chalil was, they'd never be able to fight their way to him through the swarm of military men in the hall. Han tried his bluff again.

"Ensign," he began, deliberately inserting a tone of cold menace into his voice, "I do not have all day. I want--"

"Is something wrong, Lieutenant?" The voice was oily, unctuous. Han straightened and turned to face a senior security officer. "Major Rayen s'Doge," the officer said with an artificial smile, acknowledging Han's salute. Han presented his bogus ID and repeated his cover story. The major barely glanced at the ID. "Wenlow," he snapped to the ensign, "comply with this officer's requests." He smiled at Han once more. "You will have no more problems, Lieutenant." His smile grew sleeker. "I assure you, Lord Vader's men will always receive our total cooperation." He handed the ID to Han, drawing it back at the last minute to say archly, "I trust Lord Vader will hear of my esteem for him?"

Reaching out for the ID, Han gave a slight bow. "I assure you, Major, Lord Vader will most certainly hear of your actions today."

Directing once last minatory glance at Ensign Wenlow, the major strutted off.

Han turned back to the duty desk. In a colorless voice, the ensign asked, "The prisoner the Lord Vader is interested in?"

Han's passive voice hid his sudden exultation. "Prince Chalil Mikhail Organa of Alderaan."

The ensign nodded and pressed a series of buttons on his console. "Prince Chalil is being held on Level 157, Central Tower." He leaned over, took a hoxex from one of the lower drawers of the desk. He fed the slender wand into the computer console. When the computer ejected it, he passed it to Han. "This will guide you to the proper cell, sir."

Han accepted the hoxex. Motioning to the others, he turned to go. They hurried down the narrow hallway to the elevator complex. Han waited for an empty cage, then ushered his small party aboard. He motioned to Dana. The ex-Guardsman snatched the sound damper from Leia's hands and switched it on.

"Look, we're almost certainly on visual, so if we keep the damping field on too long they'll get curious enough to pull in a lip reader. Let's make this was brief as possible." Turning to Dana, Han asked, "Is there anything significant about the prince's location?"

Glancing sympathetically at Leia, Dana nodded. "The 157th level is reserved for intensive interrogation. The prince may be broken."

Terror clouded Leia's eyes and she quickly rejected Dana's words. "No, never. He would never give in to them."

Han and Dana exchanged quick, concerned looks. If something had gone amiss, and the princess refused to acknowledge it-- "Princess," Han said gently, "if he's anything like you he'd hold out until doomsday. But they may have destroyed his mind."

Leia searched Han's face, as though looking for the truth he was not telling her. Her hands clenched in the folds of her divided skirt. "I--I know. But let's go in as though he's all right." She paused, then whispered, "And he will be, I know it."

Han studied her for a long moment. He understood the burden of guilt she

carried. If he could spare her the pain that might still be hers he would. He dargged his palm across his face and swore silently. Leia had chosen this path of her own will. She was strong; she might need to be stronger still. All he could do was stand by. "As long as you realize action might be necessary, Leia."

She nodded without looking at him.

Han gestured to Dana, who turned off the damper. They did not speak further; there was no need. Everything depended on what they would discover in the prince's cell. But with Leia's blessing or without, Han swore he would not leave Leia's brother to the mercies of the Imperial interrogators.

The elevator slid to a smooth stop and they debarked on the 157th floor. A long, empty corridor stretched before them. Han checked the holox. Activated when they left the elevator, a bright red arrow now floated in the center of the narrow wand and pointed straight ahead.

Han led the way down the corridor. They reached a cross-corridor and the red arrow flickered, pointing to the right. They followed the arrow to another branching, were led to the right yet again, then straight for several meters. They passed a number of guards and troopers, as well as an occasional officer or interrogator.

Save for brief side-long glances of ill-concealed curiosity, the Imperials ignored them. Han breathed more easily as he sensed the nearness of their goal. In just a few more minutes they would be at Prince Organa's cell.

A Guards officer passed, glanced at them, then did a double-take. "Rook?" he said doubtfully. Then, more positively, "Rook!"

Han stiffened. "Oh, shit," he swore under his breath. Leia and Dana started to turn and Han hissed, "Don't slow down,

step it up."

"Rook? Rookhan Parnell!" The officer was beside them and clapping a stunned Han on the shoulder. "Damn your eyes, Rook, but it's good to see you again!" The Guards officer clasped Han to his barrel-chest, then held him at arm's length. "I don't believe it," he said. "It's been what, ten years?"

"Yeah," said Han, feeling distinctly ill, "about that. How you been, Turkell?"

"Been stuck in the Outlands for years, I have," the other went on happily. "Just as well. Away from you and your hell-born ideas, I got my eagles." He gestured proudly to the ranking on his shoulder. Then, shaking his head, he slapped Han on the shoulder once more. "Remember when you drew six month's suspension for paddling that snotty little princess you caught climbing out of the jewel-room? What in Stralm's name have you been up to since?"

Han heard Leia's startled intake of breath and winced.

"That's right," Turkell went on with a wide grin, turning to Dana and Leia. "Never think it to look at him, but he's the damndest crazy daredevil the Guards ever had." He cuffed Han on the arm. "Now, listen, Rook, what--"

Han parried his old friend's eager questions, finally agreeing to meet him later for drinks and sending him on his way. Han then turned to Dana and Leia. The princess glared at him angrily, her fury obviously kindled by the memory of events more than ten years past. Dana flicked an amused glance from princess to smuggler.

Han grabbed the damper from Dana and flicked it on. Taking Leia by the elbow, he dragged her down the corridor. "You can scream at me later," he said, giving her a good shake, "after we get your brother." She nodded agreement, but the look she threw him promised prompt vengeance at the earliest opportunity.

Han let his breath out in exasperation. This mission had been risky enough at the start, but their chances of success had just plummeted. When Security reviewed the tapes of his meeting with Turkell, and compared it with the tape of his entrance to Llangero1, they had better be long gone.

Assured of Leia's temporary cooperation, Han clicked off the sound damper. They continued down the corridor until the holox emitted a sharp whine.

Han stopped before a door set flush with the wall. He glanced doubtfully at Dana. "The holox," Dana said. "Run it along the four sides of the door. It'll break the connections and the door will open."

Han followed Dana's instructions. For several seconds nothing happened. Meeting Leia's worried glance, Han smiled reassuringly. He wished, however, that someone would reassure him. Had this rescue mission been a trap from start to finish? He wouldn't put such convoluted plotting past the Imperial mentality.

The door's opening did not placate him. He did not trust the comparative ease of this rescue, and wondered what he would find in the prince's cell. Cautioning Leia and Dana to stand guard, Han stepped over the threshold. He glanced around to check that there were no armed troopers in wait, then blinked in disbelief.

After Dana's grim waning about the 157th level, Han had expected a grid-scan, or an interrogation droid, perhaps even medieval torture devices. He had not expected tapestries and etchings, kerel-wood furniture and leather-bound books.

Stunned, Han looked around once more. Matched holographs of wooded parklands filled the far wall. The illusion was complete, even to the sweet scent of sarafine drifting in through the 'open windows' on a soft 'breeze'. Cell? If he didn't know better, Han would swear

he was in the favorite study of a crown prince who took his obligations seriously.

Han shifted his gaze to the room's sole occupant. Where did Prince Chalil Organa think himself?

The silver-haired young man sitting at the work-strewn table in front of the central 'window' stared at Han and raised his brow. "Yes?" he said in the tones of one disturbed at matters of state.

"Chalil!" Hearing his voice, Leia started into the room. Han blocked her path. Something was wrong, very wrong about this golden cell.

"We are here to escort you to--to His Imperial Majesty, sir," Han said.

Slowly, the prince rose to his feet. He inclined his head to them. "I am at your disposal, gentlebeings."

"Oh, dear Mother, no. No!" Pain threaded through Leia's harsh whisper and she pushed against Han.

Pulling her in front of him, Han gripped her shoulder. "Sir, do you know who we are?"

The prince's so very blue eyes shifted from Han to Leia to Dana, still in the doorway. "You are my honor-guard, are you not?"

Leia bit her knuckle and choked back a protest at her brother's words. "Prince, Han said gently, "where are you?"

The prince waved carelessly to the holographs. "Why, in my rooms in the palace."

"What palace?" Han persisted.

"On Alderaan, of course." The prince's eyes narrowed as he studied them more carefully. "Who are you?" He moved to the table, slid open a drawer; the contents were hidden. Leia expelled her breath in a ragged sob.



Han tightened his grip on her shoulder. The prince peered out at them suspiciously, and Han reached for a calming answer. "We --we are in the Emperor's service, Prince Chalil. He has been gracious enough to lend us to your father's court, to add prestige and honor to the name and the reign of Bail Organa."

Nodding, the prince shut the desk drawer. "I see. Yes, that would be like his most gracious Imperial Majesty." He turned, picked up a long blue cloak from a chair against the wall.

Han could sense Leia's tenseness, was aware of her shattered dreams of reunion. He stared at the prince. Those damnable interrogators had plied their trade well. The prince was lost in a world of fantasy. Would the stark reality of the bare walls and the prison passageways outside of this world of illusion break the prince's conditioning? Han nodded toward the door. "Prince? Shall we go? It is time to escort you to his Imperial Majesty's presence."

The prince swirled the cloak around his shoulders and fastened the neck closings. Adjusting the folds, he turned to Han. "I am ready," he said simply.

"Damn it, Chalil, stop it! Stop it, stop it!" Leia strained against Han's arm. Her voice bordered on hysteria. "You don't have to act anymore, you're among friends!"

The prince raised a quizzical brow. "But of course I am. Has not this officer so assured me?" He held his hand out to Han in a gesture of cheerful comradeship. Pinpricklings ran up and down Han's spine.

Breaking away from Han, Leia ran to her brother and forced him to look at her. Han switched on the damper just as Leia cried, "Chalil, it's me, Leia." She reached up and grabbed his shoulders, shook him. "They can't have gotten you, not you." She laughed, and Han winced at the pain and the terror reflected in the sound. "You told me you'd spit in their faces and damn them all to hell, you know

you did."

A shadow passed over the prince's face as he looked down at his sister. "Leia?" he said questioningly. His hand shook as he touched her darkened cheek. "Leia," he repeated, and fingered one of her silver curls.

"Oh, Chalil," Leia cried. She buried her head in his chest and tightened her arms around him. Tentatively, his arms enfolded her. He patted her back vaguely. Han forced himself to relax; maybe it would be all right.

Slowly, the prince pushed Leia away. He looked at Han. "Shall we go?" he said with a sun-bright smile. "I want to see my little Leia again."

Han put out a hand to steady Leia. He looked quickly away from her stricken face. Taking a deep breath, Han nodded to the prince. "Yes, sir, that's what we're here for."

The corridors were still relatively deserted. The prince swept down the long hallway as though he were indeed in his own palace. A side door opened and several officers dressed in the maroon-and-silver of Imperial interrogators stepped out. Han steeled himself for fireplay. To both sides of the prince, Dana and Leia stiffened also.

The parties converged. The Imperials saluted half-heartedly and continued onward. Disbelievingly, Han returned their salutes. His heart beat so loudly he was sure the Imperials would hear and return to investigate. He felt an ominous tickle down his spine until the interrogators turned a corner and passed from sight.

Dana met his glance. "I don't think I like this."

Han gave a short laugh. "I know I don't like it," he said, "but it's the only game in town, and it's for sure we

can't throw our chips in now."

Leia glared at him. She opened her mouth to deliver what he knew would be a burning tirade, but clamped her jaws shut when he held his hand up warningly.

The elevator banks were in view now, and Han breathed more easily. They'd taken the first hurdle. Planning out his next move, he was caught completely unaware by the sudden klaxon of the alert system. Leia darted a startled glance toward him. "What--?"

He motioned her to silence. "I don't know. If we--"

The intercom interrupted him. "Lieutenant fil Ron, report to the identification level immediately. Lieutenant fil Ron, report to the identification level immediately." A second message was piped in through the comm-unit. "Lieutenant Rookhan Parnell, report to the main control module."

"I knew this was going too well," Dana groaned.

"And again you don't have any plan for getting out?" Leia said sharply.

Han spun on her. "Look, Your Worship, it wasn't my idea to raid L'angerol in the first place, just bear that in mind." He jerked his head toward the elevators. "C'mon. Maybe we can still make it before they put on and one together and come up with three."

Hustling the prince as quickly as they dared, they headed toward the elevator banks. The tinny tones of the intercom sounded through the wheeping of the klaxon. "Prisoner escape! Prisoner escape! All units to level 157."

Han stopped short and pulled Leia back. He scanned the elevator indicators; the lights blinked brightly, signaling imminent disaster. Two of the elevators reached the 157th level, and the doors opened to disgorge stormtroopers. "Come on, back the way we came," Han shouted.

The first line of troopers fired. As lances of flame burned into the wall behind them, Leia and her brother ducked. Han gave covering fire. "Damn," he shouted, "don't they care if they hit the prince?"

Dana dodged a too-close shot, fired off a return burst. "He's served his purpose," he retorted. "He brought the princess here for a nice, tidy disposal."

Han glanced quickly at Leia. Firing now in a steady stream down the hall, she appeared not to have heard Dana's comment. Han looked back at Dana. "A trap?"

"What do you think?" Dana snapped.

Dana was right. The only trouble was--Han shoved the princess out of the line of fire, then snapped off another shot--on how many levels had this trap been set? And could it be safely sprung?

Imperial reinforcements arrived and opened fire. "We'll never get back to the main floor that way," Han shouted over the din. He herded the others into one of the branch corridors. The prince protested, but Leia urged him on.

Dana plastered himself against one of the walls and risked a glance down the main corridor. "If we can't go down, the only thing to do is go up."

Peering around the corner, Han lined up another shot. "Up?"

"The roof port."

"Any way of getting there besides the elevator?" A shot screamed past Han's head and he pulled back hastily.

"A stairway two corridors over," Dana replied as he drew back into cover.

The prince pulled away from Leia. "What's wrong? Why are we firing at Imperial troops and running from them?"

"They aren't Imperial troops, Your

Highness," Dana said quickly. "They're assassins, hired to prevent your attendance on his majesty's pleasure. They're trying to foment rebellion among your subjects."

The prince darted a suspicious look from one to the other of them. "I do not know what to believe," he said, "nor whom to trust."

Leia reached out to him. "We would not betray you, Cha--Your Highness. We--" A shot burned into the wall behind her, sending white plastasteel chips flying. She ducked, and dragged the prince down, too. "Damn it," she shouted, "this is NOT a GAME! That blast could have drilled through you!"

Red and green bolts flared up and down the corridor. The prince inched out of the direct line of fire. He nodded slowly in response to Leia's words. "But why? What--"

"No time for that now, Your Highness," Han shouted over the raging battle. "Let's just get the hell out of here."

They pulled back, firing all the while, then raced down the corridor, Leia and the prince in the lead. Han and Dana took guard position, twisting as they ran to snape off random shots at the pursuing troops. "We'll never get out of this," Dana yelled.

"We have to try," Han shouted back. "Otherwise--" He did not have to finish his sentence.

Dana nodded, then pointed to a small corridor to the right. "The stairway's down this way," he said, and turned down the passageway. Han thrust Leia and the prince after Dana, and fired several delaying shots at the Imperials. Ducking into the corridor branch-off, he raced after the others.

"We better get out of here soon," he panted. Holding up his blaster, he said, "My charge's on low."

Dana checked his weapon as he ran. "I don't have enough power to give you a boost," he said. A shot sizzled past him and, spinning, he picked off a stormtrooper in the act of firing again. The Imperial soldier slammed into the wall, then slid to the floor where he lay in a broken, smoldering heap.

"Nice shooting," said Han, laying down a blanket of covering fire.

"We'll have to hit the armory," Dana said, ignoring the compliment. "They won't let us waltz out of here with the prince if we have half-empty blasters."

"How far are we from this mythical armory?" Glancing ahead at Leia and the prince, Han added, "I don't know how much longer we can stave off trouble from this end."

Giving him a glance that spoke volumes, Dana nodded. "It's on the roof."

Catching up to Leia and Prince Chalil, Dana pointed to a door several meters on. "Through there," he indicated. Reaching the door, they tried to open it, but the holox did not work and there was no access panel on their side.

"And it's magnetically sealed," Dana said in tones of deepest loathing.

"Some emergency exit," Han commented in disgust, glaring at the stubborn door.

Leia, firing down the corridor at several stormtroopers who had followed them down this branch-off, shouted over her shoulder, "Well, unless we want to meet the Maker, someone had better do something, and fast."

Han glared at her, knowing that her 'someone' could be translated to 'Han Solo'. Directing Dana out of the line of fire, Han blasted through the wall beside the door. "More'n one way to skin a vulfkor," he said in satisfaction. "Come on."

They clambered through the smoking, gaping hole. Pointing to the stairway, Dana said, "we want to go three flights up."

The emergency stairs were steep, narrow, and dark, but Han was in no mood to carp. Taking the stairs two at a time, he led them halfway up before green and red bolts burned into the walls ahead and behind them.

"Sweet-Morga-and-Stralm forever," Han swore as he flattened himself against the wall. "Whoever's running this show is a lot smarter than I like." The cross-fire pinning them down was deadlier than the chase they had escaped.

"We can't stay here all day," Leia protested.

Han, afraid she meant to charge up the stairs on her own, pushed her back against the wall. "Will you be careful? I didn't go through this so you can get your gods-be-damned head blown off!"

She shook him off. "Then do something," she whispered angrily. "You're the brains of this outfit."

He glared at her, furious at having his own words thrown back in his face. Before he could say anything, Dana poked him in the ribs. "You can fight to your hearts' content on the *Falcon* or the base. Right now we have more important things to worry about."

Yeah. Like staying alive. Directing one last angry glance at Leia, Han crept further up the stairs. "Keep us covered," he warned her. She nodded and retreated down several steps. Without exposing herself, she fired off several blasts calculated to send their pursuers scurrying.

Han slid past Dana, risked a peek around the curve in the stairwell. A barrage of blaster shots drove him back. He shook his head. "Only three or four troopers above us, but a fat lot of good that is if we can't break through."

"High-low?" Dana suggested.

Han bit his lip reflexively. The attacking Imperials were good. Hell, they were very good. But they would expect a dash from cover, a suicide attempt to take the stairs or to retreat. Han nodded. "'S worth a try." He inched down to the prince and explained, as briefly as possible, what they planned. Privately, Han hoped he could pull off his own part of the stunt. He'd not pulled such a trick in more years than he cared to remember.

Dana clambered onto the prince's shoulders and slid along the upper part of the wall until he was near the ceiling. His back to the stairwell, Han sat on the floor and hooked his heels around the prince's ankles. "Now!" Han said as he dropped backward to the floor.

Simultaneously, Han and Dana popped out from concealment and fired at the Imperials guarding the head of the stairs. Their maneuver caught the troopers, prepared for a mid-level assault rather than one from ceiling and floor height, unawares. Three of the attacking force collapsed in smoking piles, the fourth strategically withdrew.

Han sprang to his feet and Dana leaped down from the prince's shoulders. They raced up the stairs, Leia and the prince following. Hurdling the bodies of the slain stormtroopers, they continued to the 160th level.

"Through here." Dana blasted the door open, led them down several long, deserted corridors. They almost ran into the squad of troopers stationed outside the armory. The battle was pitched, bloody, and brief. But for Han, caught once more in that surreal world of time-drawn battle readiness, it took forever. Momentary fragments of reality burned themselves into his mind, and he was unnaturally aware of what was taking place--and his reactions to it.

He knew he'd have nightmare for months to come about the young, unarmored aide-

de-camp he blew apart. *Damn kid. He was no older'n Luke. He sure didn't expect the war to come calling on him here. Not in Llanderol.*

The klaxon wheeped and frantic orders blared from the intercom. Han jolted back into realtime, aware suddenly that they were inside the armory. He looked around. Cavernous, two-storied, the room took up most of the 160th and 161st levels. Weapons and munitions were stockpiled to the vaulted ceiling and a small office, dark and empty, was off to one side.

Han tapped Leia on the shoulder and pointed to the inner chamber. "Take your brother there, Princess, and let him rest. Dana and I'll get ammo and weapons for you."

She seemed reluctant to let him pick her weapon, but a glance at her brother convinced her. "Come, Your Highness, let these men finish their job. We are in the way here." Gently, she led Prince Chalil to the office.

"I do not understand," the prince said. "Who would send so many assassins after me? And how could so many sneak into the palace?"

"I do not know, Your Highness. If we think, we may be able to discover your enemy."

Leia and her brother disappeared into the office, and a light flared on as the door closed behind them. Dana, looking up from the pile of shock grenades he was stuffing into his uniform tunic, stared after them. Catching the look on Dana's face, Han asked, "Will he be all right?"

Drawing a ragged breath, Dana shook his head. "I doubt it. I've seen that super-rational behavior before on victims of the Question. It usually means they're completely brain-burned, and running on programming." He moved on to the next stockpile and examined the neutron bazookas still stacked in their factory

crates. "I only wonder if the princess knows?"

Han clicked the bolt into place on the blaster he'd just selected, shoved it into his holster. He tossed a second blaster across to Dana, selected one for Leia. "She knows," he said grimly. "But she'll die before she admits it."

Several more alarm systems went off. "They'll be here soon, Han." Dana scanned the room, then his glance flew to the outer door. "We may have all the weapons we need to wait them out till the day after Doomsday, but I doubt if you remembered to bring a box-lunch."

Frowning, Han peered around at the shadowed corners and hidden recesses of the armory. "How long could we hold off a shock assault?" He looped a string of perimeter-bombs around his neck.

"Until we starve," Dana said, continuing to load small anti-personnel mines into his pockets. "Their mistake was in engaging us in the corridor. If they'd been in here, with the fire doors sealed, we'd never have broken in." Han raised an inquisitive brow and Dana made an impatient gesture. "Han, this is an armory. The damn thing's magnetically sealed forty-seven ways to endweek. If it weren't, and anything ever went wrong in here. . . "

Han glanced at the weapons and ammunition piled high above his head and nodded. If the armory doors and walls weren't magnetically sealed, and an explosion were set off in here, the entire city would be wiped out. "Can we get out of here?"

Dana paused thoughtfully, hand hovering over another piece of munitions. "They'll be sending a full task force after us, and chances are they've already got troops on the 59th and 62nd levels just waiting for us to make a move. If we can get to the elevator banks, though, we might still have a fighting chance."



"The elevator banks are on manual override by now, and loaded with troops."

Dana smiled sardonically and pointed to a pile of a-grav belts. "Who said anything about using the elevators? All we need are the shafts."

Han gave a quick burst of laughter. "Let's go now, then," he said, "before they deploy the tower's full strength to this floor." He grinned ruefully. "I really don't feel like staying here to starve." Opening the office door, he said, "Leia, let's move it."

The shadow returned to the prince's face. He looked at his sister, repeated her name in seeming wonder. Jagged relief was in Leia's voice, on her face as she ran to him. "Chalil, you do remember, you do!"

The prince embraced her. His hold tightened and she raised a tear-stained face to him. "Oh, Chalil, it'll be all right now, you'll see. We'll get out of here and then everything will be all right."

Such joy on Leia's face embarrassed Han, and he turned away, reluctant to have her know he had seen her at her most vulnerable. Let her have these few precious moments with her brother. She might have nothing else. Han caught Dana's amused gaze on him and shrugged. All right, so his actions didn't fit his mercenary image. No one else need know.

"Leia." The prince's voice was flat, devoid of any emotion. *Oh, sweet Mother, no!* Alerted by some unknown sense to danger, Han moved forward; Dana moved a split second later. They were too late. Prince Chalil's hands were around his sister's throat, were tightening there. "Leia," Chalil said again.

Han and Dana tried to pry the prince's hands apart, but they were locked around Leia's slender neck like durasteel binders. Desperation drove Han, and he did not care if he hurt the prince, not with Leia's life at stake. Slowly, he pried Chalil's

fingers back, and Dana gave his own strength to the job. Together, they finally broke the prince's grip. "Leia," Prince Chalil repeated. His face was peaceful beatific. Shuddering, Han thrust the choking, gasping princess into Dana's arms.

"Get her out of here," Han commanded. "And don't let her look back. I'll be right with you."

Dana glanced from Han to the crown prince of lost Alderaan. He nodded. "Be quick, Han."

Han's mouth tightened and his eyes darkened. "I will be," he said.

Without a backward look, Dana led Leia from the room. Han looked into Prince Chalil's guileless blue eyes. "Was my little Leia here?" the prince asked.

*

My fault. Mine, all mine. The litany repeated itself again and again in Leia's mind. *Everyone I love, everything I touch. . .*

She looked around for Han and her brother. She could not leave Chalil here, not like that, not so obviously a victim of the Imperial interrogators. "Dana, where's Chalil? I want--"

An unmistakable hum. "No," she whispered. "No, not Chalil." The frozen expression on Dana's face told her more than words.

She struggled out of Dana Moran's arms and raced to the door of the office. Tears streamed down her face, but whether for her brother, herself, or Han, she did not know. "Chalil!" she called, "Chalil!"

Han blocked her way. She tried to see around him, but he prevented her. "No, Princess," he said, "it was too late before we even landed."

Shaking her head, she denied the truth of his statements. "No, no. Chalil's all right, he is. He needs a doctor. He needs me." The tears burned her cheeks. "Han, I want my brother."

Han grabbed her and shook her. "He's not coming with us, Princess. Damn it, he was a time-bomb, a walking, talking trap to get you. He was programmed. He had only one thought. To find you and kill you." His hands tightened on her shoulders. "They were through with him. They'd already destroyed him. They were going to let what was left 'escape', make sure you got word of it, and then--"

Still she tried to deny Han's words. Chalil loved her. He was her favorite of all her brothers. He could not be dead. Not like this. Not because he had tried to kill her.

--then we come walking in for the execution, and they didn't even have to risk an escape. You came here on your own." Han's voice was ripe with self-disgust. "The security they have on this place, they probably knew your identity inside of ten seconds. And me feeling so damn cocky."

She drew a shuddering breath and Han tried to gather her into a comforting embrace. She flinched away from him, hardening her heart to the flash of pain that flared within his eyes. Oh yes, his words made sense. She knew he was right, and he had done as he thought best; that did not alter the fact that he had her brother's blood on his hands.

She raised shaking hands to her face and wiped the tears away. There was no time to mourn. She drew in another quivering breath. There was never enough time for her sorrow. *Oh, Alderaan, never the time to mourn. And now no time to mourn for Chalil.* Tight-lipped, she looked up at Han. She ignored the concern, the deeper emotion in his eyes lest it undo her composure completely. "All right," she said coldly, "let's get the hell out of here."

Han nodded and handed her a blaster and an a-grav belt. She buckled on the belt, checked her weapon. Han gestured to Dana. Weapons at the ready, they stormed out of the armory, on the alert for the least sign of trouble. The corridor was still empty. Han tossed several grenades behind him, then slapped the access panel for the fire-doors, which immediately slammed into place. "Take them a while to straighten that mess up," he gloated.

Leia followed as Dana led them at break-neck speed toward the elevator shafts near the outer perimeter of the tower. She felt a traitor to Chalil: he was scarcely dead, and already she was trying to save herself. Resolutely, she thrust such thoughts from her mind. She'd worry philosophy later, after she got out of this mess.

They rounded a corner and ran head-long into an armed squad of stormtroopers. Han howled in battle heat and fired steadily on them, racing toward them all the while. Dana, more subdued, accounted for a goodly number of the troopers as they turned tail to escape the Corellian's battle frenzy. Leia took careful aim, hitting every soldier she targeted. And each one she claimed for Alderaan and for Chalil.

They drove off the stormtroopers, even if momentarily. Still holding her weapon, Leia spun to face Han. Corellian smuggler and Alderaan princess faced each other over the heated weapon. Han made no move to take the blaster from her, and when Dana made a move as though in her direction, he waved the other back. The seconds ticked by loudly in Leia's mind. *Han. . . Chalil. . . Chalil. . . Han. . .*

With a ragged sob, she let her arm drop to her side. Han drew a deep breath. "Come on, Your Worship," he said, "we're not out of this yet."

She followed him, mind numb, not even caring if they were heading for another trap. She wondered once more if she would ever have time to mourn her dead,

wondered if the Alliance would not be better off if she joined her family. She shook her head, trying to dislodge the morbid thoughts, but they would not leave.

And Han. Dear Mother, why Han? Why was Han Chalil's executioner?

*

A five-line detail of troopers blocked the corridor to the elevator. "Damn, now what?" Han swore as he dragged Leia back from the line of fire and flattened himself against the wall of a branch-off corridor. "This breakout's not going to plan."

"I didn't know we had one," Dana remarked, edging around the bend in the corridor to blast the oncoming Imperials.

"'Course we do," Han said, popping out to heave a grenade down the hallway. He and Dana ducked back as the missile exploded on contact, shattering through the front line of offense. "It's the same one I always use. Blast in, blast up the place, and blast out."

Dana fired off three more shots, then pulled back as an Imperial bolt singed his left cheek. He glared at Han. "We're not doing very well on that last one, now, are we?" He pulled out an anti-personnel mine, armed it, and slid it down the hallway. The detonation shook the walls, and they heard screams of pain from the troopers. "In fact, we--" A dazed look came over his face. "Of course! 'Blast our way out'!"

"What?" Leia looked puzzled, as though she'd had difficulty following the conversation.

Han did not blame her. He was not sure he followed Dana's logic himself. "'Blast our way out?'" he repeated. "That's what we're doing, right?"

"Wrong," said Dana. "That's what we will be doing." Motioning Han and Leia

aside, Dana unslung the neutron-bazooka from his back and pointed it at the far wall. "When I say jump," he added, "I mean exactly that."

Three times he unleashed the fury of the neutron-bazooka, and each time the backlash almost knocked him off his feet. Before the debris had a chance to settle he shouted "Jump!" and raced forward, dodging green and red laser bolts. Han dragged Leia in Dana's wake and all three leaped through the hole Dana had blown through the outer wall of the tower.

For a heart-stopping moment, gravity claimed them. Han automatically shut his eyes as the earth, more than 700 meters below him, rushed up to greet him. Fumbling at his belt, he engaged his a-grav unit. It caught, bounced him once, then floated him upward.

Leia's unit caught also, but Dana dropped earthward. "Princess!" Han shouted, pointing to Dana. "Get to a planet hopper and rendezvous with Chewie."

He did not wait to see if she followed orders. Turning down his belt control, he arrowed toward Dana. Dana had starfished himself, offering the most resistance to the elements and retarding his rate of fall while he fumbled with his useless a-grav.

Sickeningly, Han realized he would not reach Dana in time. To add to their problems, the ramp ground cover was pulling back. Any second now, troopers would come storming out of L1angerol to use them for target practise. Firing his blaster, Han accelerated his fall. He shot downward until he could almost touch Dana and reached out. Dana pulled in his arms and legs and turned a somersault in the air. He stretched upward, searching for Han's groping hands, but could not reach him. Han fired his weapon again, grabbed Dana, and turned his a-grav up. There was a jolt as it struggled to pick up the extra burden.

The unit caught, dropped them two meters, then caught once more. Han turned the unit to maximum and they shot

skyward just as several squadrons of stormtroopers boiled out of the tower and fired at them. Somehow, every bolt burned wide of the mark. Han began to wonder if his life were charmed. "Thanks," said Dana. "But next time, could you be a little faster? I just promised Morga a year's service."

Han grinned. "So little faith in your Brother-of-Arms?" He sobered as they bobbed above the rim of the roof in time to see Leia, cornered near a small four-passenger hopper, fall under a blast from a uniformed guard's weapon. She slid down, protected from further injury by the hopper's containment wall.

Han and Dana tumbled onto the roof and laid down a carpet of fire that licked toward the troops surrounding the princess. Lobbing several grenades toward the Imperial forces, Han sent them diving for cover; the Imperial demoralization was complete when Dana hurled three anti-personnel mines in their midst.

Han and Dana raced for the hopper. Scooping Leia into his arms, Han climbed aboard, Dana close on his heels.

It was a rough take-off. The little hopper was not built for the speed and maneuverability Han demanded of her. They pulled away from Llangerol-town; as the triple towers fell below them, Han engaged the comm-unit. Adjusting the earjack, he sent out a message on the *Falcon's* frequency.

An angry growl answered him immediately. He winced, and pulled the earjack out. "Damn it, Chewie, you can yell at me later," he shouted. The wookiee must have heard the pain in his partner's voice, because there was a sudden silence and a mollified woofle came over the comm-unit.

"Just shut up and listen," Han said. "We're off, but there'll be a ground defense force after us any minute, not to mention one, maybe more pickets set to head us off. We're in a hopper, so we

can't make the Jump. You'll have to pick us up. Rendezvous at--" He glanced back at Dana and raised an inquiring brow. Dana frowned, obviously cudgling his brain for a safe drop location. He recited some figures to Han and Han repeated the instructions to the wookiee. "Rendezvous at mark two/three five over seven four/nine."

Chewbacca barked affirmatively, and Han cut transmission.

"Here they come." Dana's warning brough Han's head up and he glanced out the canopy. Three cruisers were moving in from the sun, a trick he himself had used more than once. Knowing they could not venture within the planet's atmosphere, Han was confident he could stay out of artillery range.

The lead cruiser fired a bolt that burned dangerously near the hopper. Han dove planetward. The cruisers sailed by overhead, careful to avoid the pull of the planet's gravity-well. Several more bolts were fired at the hopper, but they fell shot.

The hopper hit a sudden turbulence and somersaulted like a falling leaf caught in a powerful downdraft. Han pulled back on the joystick. The ship shuddered, and Han was afraid she would be shaken apart by the strain of fighting gravity and atmosphere at speeds she was not meant to take.

He looped the ship around the curve of the planet to the nightside. Skimming the flat plains that spread beneath them, Han peered anxiously in the heads-up display for any sign of pursuit. None. Worried by this uncharacteristic lack of Imperial interest, Han almost missed the rendezvous point.

Llangerol had no moons, but even in the unrelieved blackness the ground below glowed green and blue and sickly white from minerals which lay close to the surface of the land here. Two huge rivers of contaminated ore flowed together here, and it was at the juncture

point that the *Falcon* waited.

Chewbacca flashed his landing lights. Swiftly, Han landed the hopper and jumped out. He lifted Leia into his arms, then he and Dana ran toward the *Falcon*.

Protected by the darkness from anyone seeing, Han cradled Leia against his chest. He rubbed his cheek against her hair and dropped a kiss on her forehead. She seemed stunned, rather than injured, and with care would be all right. *You will be all right, my little love. You will. I won't let--* Ships screamed overhead. Several dozen small cruisers--Llangerol's entire flotilla--were searching for them.

Han and Dana thundered up the access ramp of the *Falcon*. At the top of the ramp, Dana took Leia from Han and carried her to the medical area while Han raced to the cockpit. "Chewie!" he yelled, "let's go!"

The ship shuddered as the wookiee engaged the engine. Han burst into the cockpit, flicked half-a-dozen toggles on the navicomputer, then dropped into the pilot's seat. He flicked a quick gaze over the read-out panels, checked the panel display. "This may be trickier than I thought," he murmured.

Nodding, Chewbacca brought power up to full. Dana raced in and belted himself into the navigator's chair. Leaning forward, he touched Han's shoulder. "The princess's sleeping, Han. She'll be all right."

Han's throat closed over what was suspiciously like a sob. He said nothing, just nodded; if he didn't find some way back to base it wouldn't matter. *No time to worry, Leia, not now. But damn you, if you're not all right, I'll kill you.* He concentrated on their final break for freedom.

The *Falcon* lifted straight up. Han, face a mask of grim determination, aimed her toward the Llangerol fleet. He fired several blasts from his ship's belly gun.

The Imperial pilots panicked at the sight of a seeming madman on a collision course toward them. Several ships broke formation, leaving a hole Han zoomed the *Falcon* through. He pulled her up and out at a speed normally considered impossible within an atmosphere.

The *Falcon*'s skin temperature rose dangerously, but Han ignored it. To avoid the pickets that would be in wait for him, he pulled the ship into a shallow slingshot effect and looped out and away from the planet.

Several pieces of overworked wiring crackled and began to smoke. "Srealio-ugh," Chewbacca warned. Han nodded, knowing the *Falcon* was more than overdue for a complete overhaul.

"Time enough after we get to base, Chewie." He glanced in the rear viewscreen. The three pickets had caught onto his little trick and were lumbering after him. "Right now, we have to get there."

The wookiee howled his approval.

Working like two halves of one person, Han and Chewbacca prepared the ship for her jump. Inexorably, the three picket ships drew nearer. Dana read off distances until Han testily told him to shut up. "If I'm gonna buy it, I don't want a gods-be-damned countdown!" he said. Adrenalin surged through his system, and he nodded to Chewbacca. "Now!"

The lead picket was within firing range and loosed off a bolt of bright green flame. Han stared out the canopy as the fingers of fire reached closer, closer--

There was a sudden jolt and the stars in the distance lengthened into fiery arrows, then dopplered out of existence. Staring thankfully out at the swirling nebulousity of hyperspace, Han hoped that the captain of the picket ship had an uncomfortable ride when he rumbled over the spot where the *Falcon* had been but

seconds earlier. If he were close enough to get caught in the starwake from the *Falcon's* Jump, his ship could explode. Han's smile was as cold as the stars he had left behind.

Han stormed into the council meeting full of bitter anger, and demanding instant attention. He didn't get it.

"--and once Torbett told me that, I changed our destination to Sulpicar, and got us some clean transportation. The rest of the journey--"

Fuming at the delay, Han glanced at Luke Skywalker, who was completing his report about the events on Kasulur. The kid looked tired, disillusioned somehow, and shocked to realize he might be responsible for leading the Empire directly to Corador Base. He had learned some bitter truths. War, no matter how justified, hurt.

"--and so, Commander Dodonna, I say can we afford to risk all in another attempt to establish a beachhead on yet another--"

"--anything so ridiculous--"

"--mountain out of a velp-hole!"

"--risk everything for the faintest possibility that Commander Skywalker's actions might lead the Imperial fleet here--"

Han snorted. *Might lead them here? Shit, it's sure a bet as taxes.* He flicked a glance at Dana Moran, whose disgust mirrored his own.

After the ninth pointless argument over the pros and cons of moving the base, Han could take no more. He strode to the

head of the table. Setting a flustered Dodonna to one side, he pounded sharply on the table to gain attention.

"Damn it," he snarled, "you people run this rebellion like a portside hooker movin' uptown." Half of the overstarched faces in the audience stiffened even more at his choice of simile, but Han was beyond caring. "Yes, you have to move the base. I don't care if Luke did dump that police caravel at a by-station and come here in a clean ship. He started for Corador in a Kasulur police-yacht-- complete with tracking device."

He paused, let that sink in, then made his final point. "And that, boys and girls, means the Empire can project Luke's final destination from his trajectory. We have four, maybe five weeks at the most. Evacuate."

"But Han," Luke protested, "I jumped into hyperspace at ten standard units. They'll think we were pulled apart by gravitational stress."

Han rubbed his forehead; somehow, he doubted the nagging headache would go away. "Kid, how they gonna think that when that damn tracking device let 'em know you weren't as soon as you popped out into realspace at Sulpicar?"

Luke slumped in his chair. "You mean I blew it. I blew the whole mission."

Han cast him a sympathetic glance. "Maybe not the mission, kid. You and Torbett got the tapes back here, and far's Intelligence knows the Imps don't even know they were duped." He sighed. "But I'm afraid everything else's been shot to the ninth level of hell and back again. You may have changed course to go to Sulpicar, and switched ships, but you started here on a direct-line trajectory from your departure point at Kasulur." He glared at the Alliance leaders. "Sooner or later, the Imps'll be dropping in, looking for signs of rebel activities. You can't hide. Not from a full scan and search."

Dodonna nodded portentously. "Thank you, Captain Solo," he said, trying to reassert his control over the meeting. "We will now proceed to--"

Han was in no mood to lose his captive audience. Ignoring Dodonna's ploy, he stared angrily at the assembled Alliance leaders. "We will now proceed to what I came to this meeting about," he snapped. "What kind of protection is the Princess Organa given? Will someone please tell me how and why she was allowed to get off base and onto Llangero-planet?" His mouth went dry with the memory of events three days past. "Of all the stupid, ill-considered, Stralm-be-damned. . . Who the hell had the bright idea of bringing her information about her brother? You should have known she'd go haring off to rescue him. But no, you've never thought about Leia at all."

He stared across the table at officers and ex-Senators, at the civilian and the military leaders of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. Except for Dana Moran, no one returned his look with any understanding. Han slammed his hand down on the table. "Damn it, all you thought about was expiating your own guilt. 'Saved: one Prince Chalil Mikhai Organa to balance lost Alderaan'. And who cares how many Hani Rebs are lost? But the princess does care, damn it, she does. So she offered herself in place of all those noble young rebels, she won't have any more deaths on her conscience."

He leaned forward on the table, fingers splayed and knuckles whitening with tension. "Damn it," he said, his voice a whisper of pain, "Doesn't anybody else care? And what about Leia? After everything she's given, everything she's sacrificed, doesn't anybody care about her?"

Unable to trust himself anymore, he strode to the door. He was unsure if he would even try to coax Chewbacca to stay just a bit more. Just till Leia looked at him again, let him know she understood about Chalil, forgave him.

"Han?" He turned. Luke had followed him to the door. "I care, Han. And so--and so do you." Dana Moran joined Luke, wordlessly offered Han support.

Desperately, Han looked from Luke to Dana, then back at the assembled brass. Understanding was in Dana's eyes, sympathy--and some other, deeper emotion Han could not interpret--in Luke's. The other eyes, even Dodonna's, were blank. They had not understood a word he said. *Poor Leia. Poor damned, darling, deserted Leia.*

Wearily, Han shook his head. He knew he'd never be able to show the council members the warm, loving girl--the girl on the verge of womanhood--who had wrapped herself in a cocoon spun of Alliance propaganda. *Our Lady of the Alliance*, he thought with stark fear for his princess. *They really see her that way. They never think of her needs, her hopes, her obligations to herself. And neither does she.*

Han turned to Luke. "Well, kid, our carin' ain't about to do her much good now, is it?" He shook his head again. "No, kid, that won't do her any good at all."

He walked from the room, ignoring the talk that sprang up at his departure.

Damn Leia, and damn her rebellion. He felt trapped, confined. As trapped and confined as Leia herself much feel. *Damn Leia!* Even as he protested, he knew he had made up his mind. For Leia, he would stay. As long as he could, he would stay.



ARIES DESCENDING

(Slow Boat to Bespin)

"You do have your moments," Leia said. "Not many," she added with a teasing smile, "but you do have them." She hesitated a moment, then gave Han a soft kiss on the cheek. Thankful for the quiet, for the lack of complaints, she left C-3PO turned off. She reseated herself in the communicator's chair behind Han. Deliberately, she kept her eyes on the slow-moving star-field visible through the canopy. If Han laughed, or cracked a joke. . .

But the Corellian seemed to have his mind on other things than mockery. He pressed a button, then switched on the intercom. "Chewie, while you're down there, check out the, uh, the auxiliary power cables. See if you can realign the--"

"Crealorgh leirslgh frear?!!"

Even to Leia's untutored ears, the wookiee's comment rang with disbelief. She flicked a glance at Han, then tore her eyes away quickly. Was that a--she risked another direct glance at him. Then she smiled and settled back further in her seat. Yes, it was. Hot-shot Solo was actually blushing. This trip might prove rather interesting, after all.

"Just take care of that like I said, Chewie," Han said through gritted teeth. "And do it thoroughly. Don't bother me for, oh," he turned his head, met Leia's guileless gaze, "for at least the next few hours."

"Leiaiorgh roilgh--"

Whatever Chewbacca had been saying was lost when Han flipped off the controls of the comset. He swung his seat around to face Leia, then smiled the soft, slow smile that had been haunting her, infuriating her, for the past three years. "And now, Leia-my-sweet, I--"

She put a hand, still gloved, over his mouth. "Han, I don't--"

He took her hand in his. "Sssh. I know. But don't say a word. Not now. For once, Leia, lovely Leia, be simply that. . Lovely Leia."

She looked down at her hand, imprisoned in his. To be but Leia. Not Leia the Princess/Senator Organa. Not Leia the commander of an outpost of the Alliance forces. To be--just Leia. She raised her eyes to meet Han's steady gaze. "I'd like that," she said simply.

The smile Han gave her held nothing of mockery, nor of victory. He leaned forward. With his free hand he cupped her head, exerted the slightest hint of pressure until Leia was leaning into his kiss. It was soft, gentle, cool. Singularly undemanding.

He released her hand, only to frame her face with both of his. Drawing back somewhat, he studied her closely, as though memorizing the changes since last they'd been this close. So much time since then. So many deaths. *Llangerol. . .*

Her thoughts must have been mirrored on her face. Han frowned, and traced a finger down the side of her cheek. "No, Leia. Not now. No thoughts. Just be."

She started to shift back into her seat and his hands here on her shoulders, holding her where she was. She shook her head. "I can't. I--"

Han gave her a small shake. "Stop rebelling it up, for this bit at least, Leia. You're so busy fighting, you forgot to be a woman." The look he gave her was compassionate, wryly knowing. "Your damn 'cause' stole your childhood,

Princess. Don't let it rob you now, too."

The smile started with his eyes and slowly lit his face. Leia felt her sense of purpose slipping away.

"Forget the damn rebellion, Leia. You can't do anything about it now, anyway, until we get to Bespin. So let it lie. Forget everything. Everything but us."

To forget the deaths, the maiming. To forget the running, the last-ditch fighting. To forget the doubts. *How many more deaths, Leia? And all on your head. How many deaths before your right becomes as bad as their wrong? And what the hell makes your right right to begin with?*

She took a deep breath, shook her head again. She'd found the strength and succor she'd needed in his arms once before, after the Death Star--and Alderaan. And both of them had been running from the memory of that night ever since. For Han it'd been even worse. She'd never let him forget Massassi. Or *Llangerol*. And to use him again, simply for comfort. . . "Han, I don't--"

He silenced her once more, this time with his lips. She sighed. Clutching his shoulders, she gave herself to his kiss. The kiss grew deeper, and Leia opened her mouth under the soft insistence of his tongue. His mouth tasted of ice and citrus-fruit, and in one corner of her mind she wondered if she tasted as fresh and clean to him.

It was almost as though he heard her thoughts, because he slowly pulled away from her. He sat there quietly, hands still on her shoulders, smiling across at her as intimately as though they were occupying the Imperial bridal suite. And they were quite alone, with no wookiee, no droid apt to interrupt.

Still smiling, Han reached one hand out to her face, lightly skimmed the tips of his fingers over her skin. He

traced the slant of her eyebrow, tucked a straying strand of hair behind her ear, followed the line of her jaw down to her neck. His eyes imprisoned hers as his fingers ran lightly around the rim of her collar to the hollow of her neck, then back to her shoulder.

Leia's heart began to beat more rapidly, and she felt her breath come faster. His hands on her shoulders were insistent, and she flowed with them almost without thinking. In one fluid movement he brought her to her feet and across to his lap, where she straddled him.

His mouth engulfed hers. The smoothness of his lips, his tongue against her own. . . Leia put her arms around Han's neck, confident that this time, at least, there'd be no nattering droid breaking her concentration. She held Han tightly, ran her hands across his back, through his hair.

Han drew back from her, settled into his chair.

"Han, is something--" He smiled and put a finger to her mouth. Then he reached behind his neck and took one of Leia's hands in one of his own. He brought her hand forward.

Slowly, he peeled off her white glove. The deliberateness of his movements was maddening. And the lurking devil in his eyes assured Leia that he knew exactly what he was doing. He lifted her now-bare hand to his mouth and kissed her palm, his breath and tongue tickling it softly. Then he gently nibbled on each finger, finally running his tongue over the pulse point of her wrist.

Leia had never thought of her hands as a particularly erogenous part of her body. She was finding that, in the hands of an expert, any part of her could be made to respond to pleasure. Her fingers, tingling with the slow, teasing movements of his mouth, itched with the need to touch him, to hold him,

to feel him.

Han seemed in no particular hurry. He repeated his teasing actions with her other hand, then seemed content to just sit quietly holding her for a while.

Leia took advantage of the situation. Closing her eyes to heighten the tactile impressions, she ventured to acquaint herself with the feel of him. His face, his hair, his hard-muscled chest beneath the pilot's jacket. She had wanted the touch of him, the feel, so much. But it was not enough. It had been too long since Massassi, and there were too many deaths between them. *Chalil*. . .

Han stirred, that uncanny perspicacity that he displayed toward her moods and needs to the fore once again. He turned her face toward his. One hand raised her head to his until he could claim her lips. His other hand played soft, gentle games with her face, her neck, her hair, the closing of her white cold-suit.

Before she fully realized what he was about, Han opened her suit to the waist. Still entrapping her lips with his, he shifted so that he could slip both hands under the confining material of the jump-suit. He slid the quilted thermal material from her shoulders. Then his smooth, cool hands encircled her. Leia shivered.

Han's lips moved to her neck, and she arched her back under the caressing pressure of his hands. He seemed to find particular pleasure in the hollow of her throat, in the pulse point beating rapidly at the base of her carotid artery. Then his mouth moved lower, raining a trail of soft butterfly kisses down the slope of her breasts, stopping only to pay homage to the heart-shaped mole on the right one.

Leia shifted, fitted her body more securely on his lap, and leaned back against his supporting hands. A tremor

shook her as his mouth fitted itself over her right breast. His tongue played enticing little games with her nipple, curving about and around it, teasing her, awakening her, making her hungry for more.

He'd been right, damn him. The war had made her lose all perspective. It was life that was important, not death. Life, and the proud avowal of that life no matter what the odds. *Never tell me the odds*. . .

And then all thought stopped as Han raised his head and reclaimed her lips. Leia's mouth opened without urging, and they kissed long and deeply. She was as eager to taste of him as he seemed to be to taste of her. And all the while his hands were running silkily up and down the curves of her upper body, now tracing his nails lightly along the line of her spine, now cupping her breasts, now gently rolling the hardened tips of her nipples between thumb and forefinger.

His lips traced the outline of her ears and his whispered stirred the straying tendrils of her hair. "Leia, I--"

He paused and shook his head as though to clear it. Leia became aware of the low, steady thrum of a tell-tale on the console.

"What the--" Han twisted to look at the read-out panel. "Oh, shit. Not now! Damn, it's just not fair." His hands tightened around her.

Leia drew away from him. "Han, what--"

He kissed her on the tip of her nose. "Button up, love. We'll have to finish this later." He shifted her off his lap, his hands lingering on the bare skin of her waist, her midriff, as though reluctant to leave. He pulled the quilted thermal-wear together and thumbed closed the fastening to Leia's cold-suit. "Now, just sit, Leia."

Anger replaced the warmth Han's skilled love-making had engendered in her. She glared daggers at him. He shrugged, raised both hands in protest. "Hey, Princess, it's not my fault. Don't go fuming off at me."

"Han, if you don't explain--" The voice was calm and rational, remarkably so, considering that sparks were still flying from her eyes. An underlying hint of command was clearly evident.

Han turned back to the console and opened the intercom. "Chewie, to the cockpit, on the double." He either ignored, or did not hear, Leia's words.

"Doirghlierfhleriasgh?"

"Cut the wise-cracks, Chewie. And get your mangy carcass up here on the double." He clicked off the intercom and turned to Leia. He pointed to the sensor panel. The thrumming noise Leia had noted earlier was coming from one of its components. "Someone's on our tail, Leia. And this is such a damnable deserted chunk of space I don't think it's an accident."

"Imperials?"

"I don't know. It's a small ship--barely a one-man yacht from the weight and size specs--but it's over-armed for its size and has damn heavy shielding. So I don't think it's just a pleasure craft. Whether it's after us or not, is another story."

"Can you lose it?" Anger was forgotten in the face of this new threat.

Han shook his head. "I don't know. Without the hyperdrive. . . Don't worry, Leia. We'll get out of this." He paused thoughtfully. "The trouble is, he may have gotten a good fix on where we're going. We've been keeping a fairly steady course since leaving Anoat." He flashed her a crooked smile. "That's what I get for letting myself get distracted. Next time I'll know better."

Leia smiled silkily. "And just what makes you think--"

There was a pounding on the door. "Fooiologhriorgh."

Han leaned over and gave Leia a quick kiss on the cheek. Then he turned back to his console. He depressed a button and the door slid open. Chewbacca clumped into the cockpit. He stood there a moment, head cocked to one side. He wrinkled his black nose. "Hiorthgyliorf?"

"Don't get gross, fuzzball," Han snapped angrily.

Leia stuffed her sleeve into her mouth to keep from laughing. Han was blushing again. That surely had to be some sort of record. Twice in one day. *And no one'd believe me if I told them.*

Chewie gave an open-mouthed grin and lowered himself into his seat. Without removing his eyes from the star-field in front of him, Han said, "And no wise-cracks from you, back there."

"I wouldn't think of it," Leia said, keeping a straight face with difficulty.

Han's snort and the slope of his shoulders were eloquent of his disbelief. "Right. And I'm the long-lost Prince of the Sith."

Leia smiled at the time-worn phrase and settled back into her seat. Han was right. She had been about to add her two credits' worth. She watched in fascination as Han's fingers danced skillfully over the instrument panel. He played the *Falcon* as skillfully as . . . *as skillfully as he played me. And that's it, isn't it? That's why we, why the Alliance never really caught him the way we did Luke. He loves a flighty lady.* She ran her hands almost lovingly along the worn arm of her seat. Her rival. How could she. . . *Share him with me, Lady-bird? At least for a bit?*

Her serious mood ended as Han began his evasive tactics. She closed her

eyes against the dizzying effect of the star-field swirling in front of the ship as Han made the *Falcon* engage in a series of spiraling loops.

"Do you really think these dramatics are necessary? I told you before, you don't have to do this to impress me."

"I'm not. I want to see if--ah. He's not following. Must have been a false alarm." He pointed to the blip moving steadily across the screen. Then he frowned and raised the magnification. "There's something familiar about the configuration of that ship." He turned to Chewie doubtfully, but the wookiee only shook his head and shrugged.

Han reached out to the ship's log and fed the statistics from the sensor screen into it. Within minutes, an answer appeared on the read-out panel. Han's frown deepened. "I don't like this. My log shows no personal contact with a ship matching that design, and yet I definitely recognize it. So it's gotta be someone I'd know on sight."

"Another smuggler?" Leia asked.

Han shook his head. "I don't think so. I don't get the right feel for that."

"Are we in trouble?"

Han and the wookiee exchanged glances, then both looked back at the princess. "Are we in trouble?" Han repeated disbelievingly.

"Are we in more trouble?" Leia amended.

Han closed his eyes and shook his head. He rubbed his temples wearily. "No, Leia, we're not in any more trouble than usual. We have the Imperials, Jabba the Hut, and Morga alone knows who else on our trail, we have a ship that can't jump into hyperspace, we just lost a damn near secured base to Darth Vader, we're heading toward a--a 'friend' I haven't seen in so many years there may not be a welcome for us, we can't squib

a message to Luke or the General at the rendezvous point to let 'em know where we're heading 'cause that might alert Vader, we--"

Leia leaned over and, in front of the wookiee's interested eyes, gave Han a light kiss on the temple. "In other words, it's business as usual."

Han reached up, caressed her cheek. "Yeah, guess you could say that. Look, why don't you go rest. It's been a rough trip and it ain't over yet."

"How far to Bespin?"

Han glanced over at Chewbacca as though for confirmation of his statistics. "We'll be using sublight and some boosting from the FTL, but without hyperdrive, it's a good ten-day trip."

Leia was startled. From the figures she'd seen on the log print-out, she knew the trip could have been done in one-tenth that time with hyperdrive. "But with FTL--"

Han shook his head. "The FTL only puts us .5 past light speed. And even though that's the fastest thing in space, it don't do us a bit of good if we can't cut through hyperspace." He smiled at Leia's look of utter frustration. "Hey, it could be worse, little one."

"Could be? I thought it was worse. You just gave a very thorough run-down of what we're facing."

Han shrugged. "We could be on sublight only. Then it'd take years to reach the closest star-system." He turned to look at her. "And while the idea of drifting through space with you for years on end may be quite romantic--"

Leia put her hand across his mouth. "I know. Neither of us can afford it. Not now. The Alliance--"

"And Jabba the Hut," Han interjected.

"And Jabba the Hut," Leia added, "just won't allow it." She rose from her seat. "I think I will take you up on that offer to get some rest." She touched his shoulder briefly, lovingly, as she rose. His hand covered hers momentarily before returning to the controls. Leia looked down at his tousled hair, then turned away quickly. "Chewbacca," she said, "you take care of things up here, okay? Han gets--'distracted' too easily."

Chewbacca grinned at her. "Cerialio-getoler."

Han took his eyes away from his instrument board. "Not with you out of here, I don't, Leia-my-sweet."

Leia smiled and left the cockpit, almost letting Han have the last word. At the threshold she turned. "Don't forget to turn Threepio back on," she reminded them, smiling at the look of distaste Han directed toward the silent, darkened droid.

She waited until the door slid shut behind her, then leaned against the cool metal wall. *Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn.* She felt like screaming, like pounding on a wall, like--she sighed. She felt like anything but the calm, cool Leia Organa who had led the Alliance forces for the past three years. And losing control would not help restore that person to her. Not now. Not this time.

She walked slowly to the main sleeping cabin of the *Falcon*. Her thoughts had seldom been so unproductive. *Why the hell does it always have to be so damn hard?*

*

Leia stepped from the sonic shower. It had been invigorating after the hectic pace of the last two--had it indeed been only two days since the Imperial attack on Hoth? She picked a brush up from the set-in dresser and stroked it through her long hair as she calculated the time

elements. Yes, only two days. And she'd seen more than enough adventure to last any two people for a much longer time. *At least there're no asteroid fields between here and Bespin. . .*

Leia did not turn around when the door to the cabin slid open. Strong, slender fingers took the brush from her hands.

"I didn't know you were programmed for hair-dressing duties, Threepio," she said calmly, fastening the flimsy robe she'd found in Han's cabin a bit more securely about her.

There was a sharp tug on her hair. "Very funny, Princess," Han said in his usual cynical tone. Then she felt his breath on her ear and his voice dropped to a near whisper that did very strange things to her backbone--not to mention her legs. "I'll be you didn't know I was programmed for this, either."

He twined his hands in the masses of her gleaming, heavy hair and bent her head back. Leaning over, he carefully fitted his mouth over hers. The kiss drained her of all desire to resist. To give herself wholly to sheer physical pleasure, just once. To lose sight of the Alliance, of the responsibilities she had carried since she was eighteen, first as senator, then as Alliance leader. Han was right, damn him, she had forgotten herself, her own needs.

With a sigh that was almost a sob, Leia twisted in Han's arms until she was facing him. Then she abandoned herself to the kiss with as much fervor as he. When they both paused for breath, Han smiled down at her and touched one finger to the tip of her nose.

"Hello, Just-Leia."

"Hello, Just-Han."

Han laughed. Despite the narrow confines of the sleeping cabin, he picked Leia up and whirled about with her in his arms. The sudden, silly

movement removed any final doubts she might have had. Leia laughed freely, something she had not done since before the battle over the Death Star.

Finally breathless, Han dropped onto the bunk. He still cradled Leia in his arms. He set her down gently next to him. He framed her face in his hands, a question in the depths of his eyes. Leia answered not by words, but by reaching out to the fastenings on his muslin shirt. This time it was she whose eyes imprisoned him as she slowly undid the shirt. She smiled then, and leaning over, she slipped it off his shoulders. He cooperated fully with her, letting her draw it off first one, then the other arm.

Shirt disposed of, Leia attacked more important problems. She traced one fingernail down the old blaster scar on Han's right shoulder to his nipple. Using just her nail, she stroked the tender areole lightly. Han drew in his breath sharply. Then he closed his eyes and began to arch under her ministrations. Leia smiled and bent to trace the scar with her tongue while her hands continued their teasing, light attentions to his body. *Play me like the instrument panel of your ship, will you, Captain Han Know-It-All-About-Women Solo? As I said, you don't know everything yet, do you?*

Han was leaning his body back on his arms. With a wicked grin, Leia knocked his arms out from under him so that he fell heavily backward onto the bed. He opened his eyes in seemingly shocked surprise, but before he could say anything, Leia was kissing him deeply, aggressively, in very evident enjoyment.

He chuckled faintly. As his arms came up behind her, Leia realized she'd made a tactical error. Han rolled over, pinned her beneath him. His fingers undid the single knot on the belt of her robe. Pushing the thin material aside, he ran his fingers along the curves of her body, skimming her flesh so lightly

that she felt only the faintest whisper of a touch. Her skin came alive beneath his fingers. She wanted him, needed him.

He surved his mouth over her breast. Leia gave a small gasp of pleasure as he tongued the nipple, then began a steady sucking. One hand teased her other nipple, and the other hand began a slow, sensuous exploration of her body. And sweet Mother Morga, how that body responded to his love-making! Leia stretched, cat-like, beneath his hands, and he knew the shadows and the crevices of her as no one had known them before.

Breathing heavily, Leia pushed him away. He raised a brow quizzically, but drew back, seemingly content to follow her lead at this point. Leia needed time to think, to calm herself a bit or bring him to the same peak of excitement that she was trembling on.

Her hands went to the waist of his jeans. She undid the fastening and pushed the pants down over his hips. She shifted out from under him, rolled him over on his back, and applied herself to the interesting proposition of divesting him of the sole item of clothing he still wore.

Panting a little from her exertions, she glanced up at him through the veil of her hair. "No boots?" she asked with a smile.

He grinned wickedly. "An old Corellian proverb, Leia."

"Be prepared?"

His grin widened appreciatively. "No, though that one's good, too. I was thinking of 'When in doubt, strip'."

She groaned. Then she slapped him on the thigh. Obliging, he kicked off his jeans. He held out his arms and she came to him willingly. They lay close, and she savored the warmth of him, the strength. Her body came alive under the artistry of his hands, his lips, his tongue, and she saw with pleasure that

she could arouse in him comparable sensations.

She was aflame, atremble, and still he controlled himself, made no move to take her. She groaned as his hand moved down to caress her inner thigh, then moved slowly upward to tantalize her. She rolled over on top of him. Gripping his hair tightly in both hands, she gave his head a little shake.

"There are names for men like you, Solo. And none of them are repeatable in mixed company."

He didn't respond, but simply pulled her head down to his so that he could taste deeply of her once more. Her hair fell forward to pool around him and he buried his hands in it.

And then the time for words, for teasing half-promises, was over, and he entered her. They met in the full heat of mutual passion, and as he exploded within her, the fury of her own response shook her slender body. She shuddered as wave after wave of blinding white flame hit her senses, and she cried out inchoately as it peaked to a fiery crescendo.

They collapsed into each other's arms, triumphantly weary, spent, yet alive as they'd not been in too long a time. *Alive. Still alive. And new life to come after, no matter what. . .*

Han brushed a strand of hair back from her sweat-slicked face and dropped a lazy kiss on her forehead.

"Hello, Just-Leia," he smiled.

"Hello, Han," she answered as she snuggled deeper into his arms, head comfortably cradled on his chest. Feeling warm, safe--loved--she allowed her eyes to close and fell quickly to sleep.

*

The ten days passed slowly, almost dreamily, with no more sudden alarms, false or otherwise, to disturb the steady tempo of the hours. The evenings of intimacy between Leia and Han deepened, and, even without their realization, spread to the daytime hours, also. They shared the same watch, prepared their meals together, arranged their ship-board tasks so they fell simultaneously, spent their off-duty hours with one another.

At one point, Leia apologized to Chewbacca for leaving him so much to the company of Threepio. The wookiee simply looked at her wisely out of guileless blue eyes and made a short comment that Han blushing refused to translate.

And while a sharing of bodies need not always lead to a sharing of minds, a sharing of lives often may. The fears and terrors Leia'd not dared tell anyone, not since her fiance's death shortly before her own imprisonment aboard the Death Star, came spilling out. And rather than meet them with mocking, self-aggrandizing comments, Han countered with his own confessions of the personal tragedy that had turned an idealistic young guardsman named Rookhan Parnell into a cynical smuggler who called himself Han Solo.

"And, yeah, I guess I always knew Lando was a rascal, but damn, he was there when I needed him, when none of my 'law-abiding' friends or--or 'relatives' even wanted to know me." Han leaned wearily back against the banquette in the *Falcon's* common room.

Leia reached a comforting hand out across the game table to the Corellian. "Will it hurt that much, to see him again?"

He smiled wryly, reached down to take her hand. "No, Leia. That part of me's dead and gone. Even if--if Rookhan did want to return to life, I don't think I'd know how to bring him back." He raised her hand to his mouth. "'Sides, I got enough to worry about right now

with you." He kissed her palm.

Leia forced down the pleasure his slightest touch caused. *No ties, no entanglements. You're the one who laid the ground rules, Leia. Don't go trying to change them now, just because you find you can't live with them.* "And with Jabba the Hut," she added.

Han met her eyes steadily. "And with Jabba the Hut."

"It's my fault, isn't it, Han? You could have paid off the bounty and been free of the Hut if I hadn't talked you into helping us raid Cinncinnatus."

Han gave her hand a gentle squeeze, pressed another kiss to her palm. "Leia-my-own, if it hadn't been Cinncinnatus, it'd have been something else. Jabba and I were on the outs even before I met Luke and old Ben. The Hut was just bidin' his time, waiting for something to hit. And with that damn bitch Antibe eggin' him on. . . ."

"Do you have enough credits to get the hunt lifted?"

"If the Hut's gotten over his snit at my blastin' off from Cinncinnatus Port without payin' him, yes." He grinned. "Look, Princess, I may have pulled your cakes out of the fire more than once, but better believe I got paid for most of those 'special missions' I took on."

She pulled her hand away and smiled wryly. "I know. You should have heard Dodonna complaining about what your 'excursions' were doing to the Alliance treasury."

Han shrugged. "I could have always let Vader reclaim the whole thing for the Empire."

Leia stood and stretched. Then she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "No, you couldn't. Rookhan wouldn't have let you."

"Why, you--" He reached for her, but

she danced out of the way. "Come over here."

"So you can hit me? Don't be stupid."

His smile was wide, crooked, and very, very sensual. "Actually, it wasn't hitting I had in mind."

Her smile matched his. "Is that all you ever think about?"

Han raised innocent hazel eyes to the overhead beams of the *Falcon*. "Not at all. I think about space-ships, too."

She laughed and came into his arms. For a small, breathless eternity they explored once again the universe of each other's mouth, face, skin, and Leia marveled that it seemed as fresh and compelling as the first time.

The intercom buzzed with static. Cursing roundly, Han pushed Leia off his lap. Rising, he stormed over to the comset. "What is it, Chewie? And it better be damn good."

"Sealirbralghspirior."

Han's face tightened. "Okay. We'll be right there." Han shut off the intercom, turned to Leia once more. He cupped her face with his hands. "We're within planet-fall of Bespin, Leia. Time to let the real world back in."

He bent to her and kissed her hungrily. Then he drew her into his arms and held her tightly, staving off that real world for yet another minute or so. "Leia, I--"

She pulled back and put a desperate hand over his mouth. He mustn't say it, no matter how much she wanted to hear it. She couldn't afford to hear his words, he couldn't afford to say them. *This damn war. And damn that Jabba.* "Shh. I know. I've known for the past three years." Clenching her hands tightly in the material of his jacket, she raised herself to meet his kiss one last time.

"But we have promises to keep, my love. Promises to keep." Her words were whispered softly against his mouth, but he heard and understood. His arms tightened around her even more, loving bonds that only she could break.

She pulled away slowly, resolutely. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Let's go meet your friend."

SHADOWSTAR

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issue 17

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